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Dancing Heroines: Sexual Respectability in the Hindi Cinema of the 1990s

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Mémoire présenté à la Faculté des études supérieures
en vue de l'obtention du grade de M.Sc.
en programme de la maîtrise

août 2003

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Université de Montréal
Faculté des études supérieures

Ce mémoire intitulé:

Dancing Heroines: Sexual Respectability in the Hindi Cinema of the 1990s

présenté par:

Tania Ahmad

a été évalué par un jury composé des personnes suivantes:

Bob White

John Leavitt

Chantal Nadeau

Résumé

Dans cette étude, l'« héroïne dansante » fait figure d'outil permettant d'identifier les différentes formes que peut prendre la représentation culturelle de la sexualité féminine telle qu'elle est exprimée dans les médias, plus particulièrement dans l'industrie du film hindi. La personnalité de l'héroïne que l'on retrouve dans le cinéma commercial des années 1990 en Inde montre qu'il s'est produit une transformation au sein du modèle de la féminité que l'on considère comme étant acceptable en Inde. Ce dernier se trouve continuellement négocié, notamment au niveau des idéaux du comportement sexuel, en fonction des standards de respectabilité ou de certaines notions populaires de moralité.

Cette transformation que l'on observe au sein des perceptions du fait féminin se manifeste simultanément à travers l'étude de la mise en scène des personnages dans les films et dans les entrevues réalisées en anglais avec des comédiennes par la revue populaire *Filmfare*. Les résultats de cette étude révèlent que la perception populaire de la sexualité féminine telle qu'elle est présentée dans ces médias traitent d'une problématique concernant les notions de contrôle, de domesticité, d'honneur et de chasteté (*lāṛ*) ainsi que de la négociation des normes chez les femmes en milieu de travail.

Mots clés : Anthropologie, Asie du Sud, Inde, média, hindi, cinéma, femme, sexualité, *Filmfare*

Summary

In this study, the 'dancing heroine' is used as a figurative means to trace representations of feminine sexuality through South Asian entertainment media and popular culture forms, specifically in the Hindi film industry. The heroines or female protagonists in the commercial Hindi cinema of the 1990s mark a transformation of notions of acceptable femininity that are continually renegotiated in terms of respectability and sexual morality. This transformation is traced through a concurrent examination of on-screen heroines in the filmic narratives of popular films, and off-screen star texts through interviews with heroines in the English-language fan magazine *Filmfare*. The findings presented in this study show how the issues of sexuality with respect to the Hindi film heroine are addressed in terms of control, domesticity and *lāj* (honour/chastity), as well as the dynamics of renegotiating respectability as a working woman.

Keywords: Anthropology, South Asia, India, media, Hindi, cinema, women, sexuality, *Filmfare*

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my appreciation of all those who mustered the resilience to offer their support for this study, financial and emotional as well as intellectual.

I extend my thanks to my director, John Leavitt. I am grateful for the encouragement and enthusiasm of Bob White, whose perspectives on the anthropology of media were an indispensable catalyst for my research, and for the keen criticisms and sharp observations made by Chantal Nadeau, who guided me through studying representation and sexuality. I would also like to thank Gilles Bibeau, Ellen Corin and John Leavitt for including me as a research assistant for their project “The Work of Culture in Limit Experiences: Spirituality and Its Shadow”, and for inviting me to participate in their reading group focusing on South Asia. The Department of Anthropology at l’Université de Montréal helped fund this study with a Bourse de rédaction in the summer of 2003. I would also like to express my appreciation for the time and patience of Patrice Desroches, who offered criticism and much-valued feedback throughout the writing process. I thank Simran Karir, who talked me through the difficult parts, and offered keen and succinct feedback on draft work. I would also like to thank Catherine Lemieux, for translating my résumé and offering moral support.

A host of Bollywood film fans and informal translators helped me grasp the nuances and conventions of the commercial Hindi film. Most important among them was my father, Athar Ahmad, who patiently reviewed countless film sequences with me in the early hours of the morning and verified my transliterations of on-screen dialogues. I thank Tehzib Morad (Auntie Billi) and her mother (Ummi) for their unending helpfulness in responding to unprompted phone calls requesting translations of *filmī* slang. I am also grateful for both the wonderful cooking and hospitality of my aunt, Tajie Katana, who helped me navigate the channels of the New York Public Research Libraries on several occasions.

Without the generosity of Ellen Corin, who was instrumental in helping get access to *Filmfare* in Montreal, and that of the staff of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center, this study could not have been possible. I also extend my thanks to the friendly and knowledgeable local video merchants of Chahat Audio Video on Jean-Talon and Baba Video Centre on boul. des Sources.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation of all the friends and family who listened to my complaining and still gave me comfort and encouragement: my parents, Farah and Peter, Faisal and Tariq, all the Laroses, especially Catherine, Pat and Alice, Nicholas Wembley Matheson Touikan for trying to teach me math in a train, as well as Angela Kouris, Simran Karir and Dara Price who are all far away.

1. Introduction

In this study, the 'dancing heroine' is used as a figurative means to trace representations of feminine sexuality through South Asian entertainment media and pop culture forms, specifically in the Hindi cinema industry of the 1990s. I examine a figure that consistently articulates concerns surrounding sexual morality, indicating the aspects of femininity that seem important not only for the industry that produces these images, but also for the viewing/reading audience that receives them. In the case of the popular Hindi cinema (i.e. Bollywood), a highly commercialized form of entertainment media, the definitive separation of the processes of production and reception becomes blurred, partly because the economic success of a film depends on its capacity to appeal to the sensibilities of its audience.

In order to trace the multiple trajectories of the 'dancing heroine', I use the most popular Hindi films of the 1990s as visual and narrative texts as well as interviews with actresses in the fan magazine *Filmfare*, which refer to the textualities constructed by the stars as well as by the journalists and are located within a larger structures of publicity. According to Rachel Dwyer: "... texts are a good source of information, since they are produced by expert players in interpreting the desires of [their paying audience]" (2000: 5). Through representations in the popular media of South Asia, I intend to examine the desires and interests concerning femininity that resonate with the audiences of the Hindi cinema.

In colloquial speech, the Hindi word *heroīne* refers both to the on-screen narrative character as well as to the off-screen professional actress, or star persona. In tandem with this basic transversal of modes of representation, I shall regard the dancing heroine as a figure that crosscuts categories and navigates through different texts. Although this study will base its analysis on the heroine within Hindi film narrative, it is not an exercise in film analysis. This is partly due to my belief that mass media representations are important vehicles for the (re)appropriation and redeployment of a repertoire of signs and symbols, in addition to being important sites for reverberations of (perceptions of) social realities, seeing that their economic success/survival is largely dependent on how well the cultural product resonates with audience sensibilities.

In addition, this study proposes to contest the integrity and analytical hegemony of narrative structures. Manjiri Prabhu's dissertation shows an important discrepancy between audience reception of films and the on-screen, textual analysis of the same films at the narrative level (2001). Rachel Dwyer notes that audience responses are themselves texts and that the audience's presence within certain texts – as they are interpellated by/depicted in such texts, or alternatively perceived through critiques – can be incorporated into an analytical approach (2000: 5). Tejaswini Ganti shows that Bollywood directors include a constructed notion of 'audience' (morality) into the processes of film production (2002), thus anticipating reception and aiming for resonance with audience sensibilities and viewing pleasure. All three authors point towards the subversion of narrative structures in the processes of reception. In response, I will examine the commonalities that travel among texts rather than the narrative details less given to figurative mobility.

A term borrowed from Mukul Kesavan (1994: 255), the 'dancing heroine' dances both as a metonymy for her more overtly expressed sexuality and as an objective observation that remarks upon the increase of disreputably gyrating personifications of virtue (i.e. ideal heroines) in the Hindi cinema since the 1960s. The dancing heroine is recognized as a female film character that combines the (negatively sexualized) vamp and the (positively sexualized) ideal heroine roles into a single, hybrid figure (Kesavan 1994: 255). Within the filmic narrative, this persona allows the female character to be sexualized in a way that elides the negative, moralizing overtones that imply a loss or forsaking of ideal 'Indianness'. This transformation renegotiates the representation of feminine sexuality throughout the film's narrative structure, as opposed to being confined to the liminal musical intervals, and points towards an important reappropriation of femininity. Although the change is not confined to the 1990s, films featuring such transformed heroines were particularly visible and popular during this period. Significant precedents, however, are scattered throughout the history of the Hindi cinema, notably Yash Chopra's 1973 production *Bobby* (Chatterji 1998), and arguably certain courtesan films (Chakravarty 1996). This indicates that roles avoiding the vamp/heroine binary had previously existed, and suggests that discourses negotiating feminine sexuality and sexual morality through the mass media preceded the 1990s.

In the course of my research, I have ascertained that the dancing heroine figure does not appear in every film of the 1990s, nor are all the actions and aspects of a character

labelled a 'dancing heroine' hers alone. Christine Gledhill refers to the incongruities in cinematic female persona as 'ambiguous', citing the example of a female protagonist who "combines aspects of the typically 'feminine' with an equally recognizable 'new' independence" (1992:203). Patricia Uberoi notes, regarding the question as to what relationships of subjectivity and objectivity can be ascertained in representations of women, that "it is patently *not* the case that *all* women at *all* times speak in women's voices" (1990: WS-41). Extrapolating on Uberoi's statement, I assert that it is quite consistent for a persona constructed for representation in the mass media to shift between models and stances of femininity, both as a strategy to appeal to a diverse audience as well as a dialogue of renegotiation that uses elements differentially familiar and recognizable to a public expecting entertainment from its cinema.

The dancing heroine is a palpable, if evanescent, figure that is conspicuously present in the Hindi cinema of the 1990s. She can be contrasted with other models of femininity, or can be used as an ethnographic marker tracing the processes of cultural change in/through multiple modes of representation. In this study, I propose that the on-screen narrative heroine can be linked to the star texts of the Hindi cinema industry's fan magazines – in different ways, on different levels and in different contexts – through the strategies and techniques used to 'sell' transformed notions of acceptable femininity to multiple audiences through mass media representation.

An examination of the figurative aspects of a filmic text is complicated by the concepts of resonance and viewing pleasure, wherein cinema addresses the desires and anxieties of a viewing public to the extent that they are incited to repeated viewing. Some films are better at this than others. Films are produced by groups of people interested in making a hit or turning a profit, and are thus interested in appealing to a perception of audience desires and expectations in order to increase the chances of success. In cases where such strategies succeed in propelling a film to blockbuster status, I argue, the attempts to resonate with audience sensibilities have been successful. For this reason, I will consider a selection of the most popular films of this study's time frame, 1990-1999, for the purposes of my analysis.

While the South Asian cinema-going public was once more socio-economically heterogeneous, since the 1970s and most notably since the advent of videocassette

technology the cinema hall has become a venue primarily for lower middle-class men (Dwyer 2000: 99, see also Dickey 1993). Dwyer notes that although this audience provides the bulk of film-viewing audiences, new cinema halls suitable for middle class audiences (with higher ticket prices, more luxurious facilities and an atmosphere also conducive to families) have been built in recent years. In addition, she notes that the values of the socio-economic group that she refers to as the 'new middle classes' seem to be gaining cultural legitimacy in areas of popular entertainment media texts such as the Hindi cinema (Dwyer 2000: 96-7). This audience composition begs the question as to whether the dancing heroine, as a figure that has resonated well with cinema audiences in the 1990s, is renegotiating a class-based model of feminine sexuality, whether the dancing heroine is a subversion of a previous or upper-class code of sexual morality, and whether this transformation is imposed on or appropriated from the sensibilities of middle-class and lower middle-class viewing publics.

Assertions that the Bollywood cinema audience generally consists of lower-middle class men, or that the social referent of Hindi film "is generally the plebeian or the *declassé* [*sic*]" (Vasudevan in Dwyer 2000:169), contrasts with what seems to be the (female) social referent for the heroine's narrative persona. Concerned neither with wage-earning nor with career aspirations despite a 'modern' education (many lovers first meet on a college campus), the heroine is marked primarily by her social/family roles/relations, her emotional experiences, the question of her particular 'Indianness' and her impeccable style. As a vehicle eliciting the possibility of identification, including regular (home) viewing and participation in the structures of consumerism (e.g. Kajol sari, Karisma sari, film heroine dolls...), the dancing heroine of the romantic Hindi film of the 1990s seems to address women of the urban bourgeoisie and all those aspiring to this status, both as potential markets of viewers/mimickers, as well as a group for whom discourses/questions of both spiritual, cultural, and material authenticity or a domestically-centred existence would be at issue.

The film heroine can also be perceived as reflecting the anxieties and desires of those aspiring to the status of the urban bourgeoisie, playing on images of secure social networks and financial security. The narrative heroines, in their (ultimately) harmonious family relationships, with their education, polished appearance and clothing, as well as their stay-at-

home status, project images of desire wherein the female character is presented as a carrier for notions of both financial and social stability. Simultaneously, the heroine's physical beauty, (selectively) confident/unashamed manner and sexual allure locate her as a potential wife. In addition, the heroine's spiritual devotion, often shown through film sequences of *pūjā* (ritual prayer, in the home or temple), figures narratively as an element that combines the desire for a secure (and ideal) lifestyle with that for an ideal partner. I argue that the dancing heroine signifies an amalgamation of desires, within whose frame a renegotiation of feminine sexuality and sexual morality can be ascertained.

The narrative heroines in the most popular Hindi films of the 1990s do not challenge the implicit life-cycle trajectory that would lead a young heroine from a romantic relationship to marriage and motherhood, although this may in some cases be postponed, or omitted, in the on-screen plotline. The focus on the young woman as a (potential) wife with regard to the male protagonist is a significant departure from the mother-son model of gender relationships. Most famously in Mehboob Khan's 1957 classic *Mother India*, the mother-son constellation can be cinematically re-figured as a nation-citizen relationship, mirroring themes of Indian nationalist discourse (Bagchi 1990), where structures of dependence, protection, and mutual responsibility take on dual significance (Thomas 1989). Bollywood films are often noted to focus on 'pan-Indian' rather than regional or local issues, thus associating the Hindi cinema with a 'national' mode of representation (e.g. Dwyer 2000: 101).

The presentation of the female protagonist primarily as a potential partner, and the focus on the relationship between the lovers (married or unmarried), suggests an emphasis on gender relations within a framework of men and women at parallel stages in their life cycles, and as a function of their (sexual) intimacy and involvement with one another. Whereas the respect and age barriers of the mother-son relationship limit the extent to which gender relations can be negotiated, the woman as a heterosexual partner is in a more plausible position to address issues of equality, citizenship, rights and obligation, both legally and informally (Lakshmi 1990: WS-73, Shetty 1995: 55). Although the figure of the dancing heroine renegotiates gender relations within a framework of sexual morality largely on an informal, socially-bound scale, the narrative heroine does occasionally make reference to legislative change, such as in the 1992 film *Damini* ('Lightning', dir. Rajkumar Santoshi)

where the heroine initiates a legal battle to prosecute another woman's rapist (who is also her brother-in-law).

a. Theoretical framework

Both the narrative heroines in the films and the star-heroines in the magazine interviews centre their discourses on the negotiation of gender relations in terms of the young heterosexual couple, married or unmarried. This negotiation is most often situated as a reworking of feminine sexuality and sexual morality. The figure of femininity that shall trace this negotiation is not a universal in her scope; she does not appear in all the films of the 1990s, nor can she be discerned in every interview with each heroine. Nonetheless, she crosscuts multiple texts and modes of representation.

Although this study will examine heroine in films as well as in publicity structures, this project was not conceived as an exercise in film analysis. Rather, I aim to trace how the dancing heroine moves and navigates between the narrative texts of the Hindi cinema and the representations of female celebrities in the fan magazine *Filmfare*. To this end, I have drawn from the anthropology of media, in its studies of both the production and reception of mass-mediated texts. I have also drawn from studies of South Asian public culture from both Western and South Asian feminist film studies and women's studies as well as from cultural studies approaches. For my analysis of film narrative and publicity structures, I have drawn from star theory and the notion of star texts, as well as from the eclectic dearth of literature focussing on the commercial Hindi cinema.

Media anthropology is a branch of anthropology that has gained increasing legitimacy in recent years. It is distinct from visual anthropology in its focus on media forms and on the interaction between production and reception processes both through and around media texts¹. Mass mediated representations, through audio, visual and print media forms, reflect the complicity of production and reception processes through the dynamics of (re)appropriation and redeployment of cultural forms. Issues of resonance with audience sensibilities refer a dialogue by which producers draw from a repertoire of signs. Although

¹ Recent anthologies of anthropological approaches to media forms include *The Anthropology of Media: A Reader* (Askew and Wilk, eds. 2002) and *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (Abu-Lughod, Ginsburg and Larkin, eds. 2002).

producers of commercial mass media can be presumed to frame their representations for a particular market, studies of audience reception have

show[n] how intended meanings often fall to the wayside during the processes of reception...
[and have shown] how meaning is actively invented during reception – distorting, eliding, even reversing encoded meaning. (Askew 2002: 5-6)

As such, Purnima Mankekar has shown, in a study centred on television serials and the ‘viewing family’ in New Delhi, how middle-class women’s reception narratives are framed by their personal experiences as well as their respective “semiotic skills [as] shaped by their positions along multiple axes of power” (1999:17). From the perspective of production processes and (re)appropriating practices, Tejaswini Ganti has examined how producers and directors in the popular Hindi film industry construct a notion of the “Indian audience”, primarily in terms morality and the limits of acceptability of particular subject matters in the commercial cinema (2002).

In this project, I trace a semiotic theme through the representations of heroines, both in the narrative texts of the Hindi cinema as well as in the print media of the film industry’s publicity structures. In this sense, my research is neither exclusively focused on processes of production, nor on reception narratives. Rather, I have decided to use the textualities of economically successful film narratives as an entry point to exploring the reciprocities between production and reception. In addition, I have used star interviews in publicity-oriented print media as a complicit space, where journalists and the magazine as a whole function both as kinds of producers as well as a kind of audience. Simultaneously within these interviews, the stars themselves operate as kinds of producers in the construction of their star texts, as well as personas referring directly to their presence in other media texts in whose production processes their agency is only minimally implicated. Throughout this study, I examine media texts and instances that arguably combine aspects of both production and reception processes. Although this project examines themes of feminine sexuality and how they travel through/among various media texts and modes of representation, it would do well to be complemented by an ethnographic analysis of production and reception narratives in conjunction with the findings of the present research.

Drawing from the ideas of Purnima Mankekar (1999), I recognize that meaning is not fixed but negotiated, that hegemonic forms are not static, and that ethnography can be

deployed as a mode of theorizing. Mankekar, in her study on the reception narratives of middle-class women in New Delhi to television serials, states that “meaning is unstable: it is frequently contested by viewers who are historical subjects living in particular discursive formations rather than positioned by a single text” (1999: 8). In no way do I assume that the discourses around the heroines in the films and print media of the Hindi cinema directly relate to, or otherwise monopolize, perceptions of feminine sexuality among its viewing public. Rather, the transformations presented through the figure of the dancing heroine are conceived in conjunction with Mankekar’s assertion that “hegemonic forms are never static – they constantly work to transform or incorporate oppositional forces” (1999:19). It is in this vein that I regard the renegotiation of sexual morality that the dancing heroine enacts.

In addition, the representational strategies that I employ during the course of my analysis seeks to trace what Mankekar refers to as “*nodes of discourses*”, thus using an ethnographic approach – or rather, the dancing heroine as an ethnographic marker – as “*a mode of theorizing*” (1999: 38-9, emphasis in original). The evanescent figure of the dancing heroine does not in any way constitute the entirety of any particular discourse. Instead, she is used as a tool to locate fragments, or nodes, of larger discourses. As such, her occurrence indicates tendencies and trends, which may at some point be concretely reflected in everyday practice, but is initially ascertained here in mass media representations.

Studies of South Asian public culture draw from the term ‘public culture’ coined by Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge. This term encompasses the interpretations and experiences of media and artefacts, stressing the tensions between the global and the local, as well as the textures and styles of transformations in economies of transnational and representational flows. ‘Public culture’ also elides the binary between elite and mass culture, naming the “space between domestic life and the projects of the nation state – where different social groups ... constitute their identities by their experience of mass-mediated forms in relation to the practices of everyday life” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995: 4-5). As such, public culture claims a middle ground as a form accessible to both the masses and the elite, as well as – in the case of the commercial Hindi cinema – a space of representation where both elite and mass forms can be reappropriated into a highly complex (and eclectic – see Arnold 1988) hybridity. The term public culture proposes to address this complexity:

The term *public* is not a neutral or arbitrary substitute for all these existing alternatives [popular, mass, folk, consumer, national or middle class]. Nevertheless, it appears to be less

embedded in such highly specific Western dichotomies and debates as high versus low culture. With the term *public culture* we wish to escape these by now conventional hierarchies and generate an approach which is open to the cultural nuances of cosmopolitanism and of the modern in India. (Appadurai and Breckenridge in Dwyer and Pinney 2001: 7)

An analysis of the commercial Hindi cinema fits well into the discussion of public culture, especially where the textualities of media forms are located as sites of negotiation and contestation.

Christopher Pinney notes the importance of a close examination of artefacts and media forms in both their production and reception processes, emphasizing contextualization and audience specificity as well as the analytic framework of 'economy', which foregrounds inequalities and disadvantageous flows (2001). Pinney also maintains "Indian public culture is without doubt a zone of cultural debate, rather than an area of consensus and agreement" (2001: 9). In this sense, my analysis of the renegotiation of feminine sexuality through the heroines of the Hindi film industry, in magazine interviews and film narratives, fits directly into the contested space of representation addressed by the term 'public culture'. However, because the dancing heroine figure of this project is contingent on the economic success of the films and print media that she inhabits, my research focuses on resonance with the sensibilities of the mass (metropolitan) audience, dynamic in its composition.

The representations of women have been much addressed in feminist film theory, both Western and South Asian. The most seminal texts explore the embeddedness of patriarchy in both the textualities and reception processes of film, addressing issues of gendered gazes and desire, as in the pioneering work of Laura Mulvey (2000 [1975]). Many approaches use psychoanalytic concepts such as voyeurism² and fetishism³ to construct the male spectator, terms that often seem to be directly appropriated into discussions of the Hindi cinema by South Asian feminists (e.g. Chatterji 1998, Prabhu 2001). In my opinion, this usage is not always justified, and sometimes appears to completely block further analysis of audience reception. Shoma A. Chatterji, for example, while providing many insightful analyses of female protagonists in the Hindi cinema – points that may not have

² According to E. Ann Kaplan: "... voyeurism ... is linked to the scopophilic instinct (i.e. the male pleasure in his own sexual organ transferred to pleasure in watching other people have sex)" (2000 [1983]: 120).

³ According to E. Ann Kaplan: "Feminist film critics have seen this phenomenon [the male endeavor 'to find the penis in women'] (clinically known as fetishism) operating in the cinema; the camera (unconsciously) fetishizes the female form, rendering it phallus-like so as to mitigate the woman's threat" (2000 [1983]: 121).

been ascertained through directly applying Western feminist theory – does move beyond the (undefined) concept of voyeurism in her chapter of on-screen representations of rape (1998). As a result of this observation, although I have studied the seminal texts in (Western) feminist film studies, their specific relevance to the South Asian context will be established on an individual basis.

In my analysis of the re-negotiation of feminine sexuality in mass-mediated representations, while I will address the sexualized male gaze, I am more concerned with reconstructing the panoply of pleasures and desires based on multiple gazes. My approach concurs with Christine Gledhill's suggestion that, as a strategy, negotiation is employed at multiple levels of the production and reception processes of a given media text (1992). Gledhill also observes that the ambivalence within the narrative structure of textual negotiations, by being constructed as open to multiple readings, could serve to address a wider audience, thus coinciding with the industry's capitalistic goals (1992: 208). Although the dancing heroine figure employs an analytical framework in which sexuality and morality are intertwined in the representations of heroines in the Hindi cinema, I suggest that the anxieties and desires of the Hindi cinema's viewing audience are equally, if not more, concerned with issues of status/honour, familial relationships, the possibility of heterosexual love and (typically male-male) friendship than with sexual impulses.

Although eroticism plays an important role in the representation of women in film texts, especially during intervals of song and dance, these elements are most often superseded by matters of duty (to relatives, friends, financial obligations) during the course of a Bollywood film plot. Nonetheless, in many of the most popular Hindi films of the 1990s, last minute and often coincidental circumstances allow the heterosexual love-relationship to prevail in the final frames. To a significant degree, and more so than eroticism alone, female sexual morality is implicated in the issues addressed by the Hindi film heroines of the 1990s. Consequently, my analysis of the dancing heroine requires recognition of the mutual imbrication of feminine sexuality and sexual morality.

Several authors in the field of South Asian women's studies have noted the development of a female figure in the Hindi cinema that parallels my conception of the dancing heroine. The term 'dancing heroine' has been borrowed from Mukul Kesavan, who defines the new heroines as making the previously irreconcilable heroine/vamp or

virtue/sexuality split redundant (1994:255). As such, he stipulates that the dancing heroine is neither a 'complete woman' nor a feminist, but a consumerist '2-in-1' embodying multiple desires (Kesavan 1994: 255). This study was conceived in large part as a continuation and elaboration of Kesavan's 'dancing heroine', but my approach suggests a renegotiation of sexuality that has implications beyond consumerism.

Several other studies, not necessarily directly concerned with the Hindi cinema address the gendered politics of representation and its implications in various contexts. Paola Bacchetta shows the importance of feminine sexuality to the Hindu nationalist ideology of the RSS (1994, 1996). Patricia Uberoi explores eroticism and social obligation in the gendered relations of the Hindi cinema (1997), as well as representations of women as signifiers "marked by [their] *class* characteristics ...: fair, plumpish, well-groomed, ornamented; both demure and confident (an Ideal Air India hostess)" in popular Indian calendar art (1990: WS-46). Carol Upadhyia criticizes the 'Indian' respectability claimed by both the urban middle classes and Non-resident Indians (= NRIs) with regard to the criticism leveled at Deepak Mehta's 1998 film *Fire*, which addressed issues of lesbian desire. She argues that public protests calling for a ban on the film revealed how patriarchal power is connected to right-wing ideology and how control over (female) sexuality is marked by "its relation to structures of power and political ideologies" (1998: 3176). Jaspal K. Singh links hysteria, nervous conditions and other 'madnesses' of the postcolonial 'new woman' in narrative representations to women's questioning and resisting of gender role constructions (1998). These studies, while not directly linked to the medium or modes of representation that I address during the course of this research, have parallel concerns regarding sexuality, representation, issues of control and gender, as well as the examination of formations of 'new women'.

The approaches of cultural studies, in their fluid and complex analyses of the political economies of gender and sexuality, have informed my notion of a figurative ethnographic marker to an important degree. Gayatri Gopinath's work deals with the issues of non-heteronormative subjectivities, the production of diasporic identity and the South Asian nation, as well as its reverberations in its British and North American diasporas (1998). Much of her analysis is centred on the interconnectedness of heterosexuality and the nation. She posits state-sanctioned heterosexuality as one of the most powerful methods of

controlling and disciplining female sexuality, where sexual autonomy is never imagined outside the heterosexual (1998: 8).

In addition, Gopinath observes the links between sexualities considered 'perverse' and those considered 'respectable' by an Indian nation interpellated as Hindu, patriarchal, middle-class and heterosexual (1998: 1). These assertions elicit a sharper delineation of the dancing heroine figure I shall trace. Gopinath states that non-heteronormative subjectivities challenge such nationalisms (1998: 8), and although the renegotiated sexuality in the Hindi cinema of the 1990s transforms aspects of acceptable femininity, it does not subvert the nation. Rather, in the increasing focus on the narrative heroine as a potential wife – who lives happily ever after in the most popular films, in an implied marital bliss – seems to renegotiate the semiotics of the Indian nation by placing the male and female protagonists/citizens on parallel ground: as lovers or husband and wife rather than mother and son. Gopinath also criticizes South Asian feminism for its lack of attention to the production of (hetero)sexuality (1998: 8). I suggest that the analysis of a mass-mediated, figurative transformation of acceptable femininity, and thus an alternative heterosexuality subverting yet apparently absorbed by hegemonic structures, can begin to address this lack.

An engagement with heroines both in terms of their narrative role-playing and in terms of the construction of their star texts, that is, the notion of the star that combines "the real person, the characters played in films and the persona created by the media" (Dwyer 2000: 116). The pioneering work on the study of stars and star texts is Richard Dyer's *Stars* (1998 [1979]). Dyer argues that the then conventionally separated semiotic and sociological approaches had to be combined in an analysis of (film) stars. He claims that sociological analyses, contending that stars do not exist outside texts, must be informed by semiotic approaches, which suggest that texts can only be studied in terms of their significations (Dyer 1998 [1979]: 1). Dyer shows that both stars and texts exist as 'social facts', occupy specific contexts in a society, and have limits as to the kinds of knowledge they can legitimately yield (1998 [1979]).

Dyer's work on stars in media texts has been adapted to stars and publicity structures of the Bollywood film industry by Rachel Dwyer (2000). She analyses the textualities and production processes of Hindi films of the 'romantic' genre, as well as of the fan magazine *Stardust* and the emergent English-language pulp fiction of metropolitan Bombay. These

textual and media analyses focus on the 'new middle classes' of Bombay as their social referent, where this new grouping is implicated both in production and reception processes of mainstream media texts (2000). Dwyer's work is the only in-depth treatment of the Hindi film industry's fan magazines that I have found. However, her analysis is rather general in the description of the magazine's content, focusing instead on the implied referent constructed by the founder of *Stardust*, Shobha Dé. Nonetheless, I have found Dwyer's work pivotal to my understanding of the dynamics of the Hindi film industry.

Through tactics that combine literature and approaches from various disciplines in my analysis of the dancing heroine figure, I have taken a stance that includes and crosscuts two aspects of specific media forms. In examining the renegotiation of feminine sexuality as it is framed within discourses of sexual morality, this study follows themes through both on-screen and print media texts, tracing the dynamics of star texts as sexuality is negotiated along various axes of representation. My notions of production and reception processes are implied by strategies of representation and trends in the popularity of particular films. The scope of this project cannot encompass research exploring all of these aspects. Rather, I am using the dancing heroine as an entry point to the dynamics of reciprocity between media producers and consumer viewing audiences.

In her dissertation on audience reception of classic Hindi films of the 1970s, Manjiri Prabhu finds (and concludes) that female viewers can see the 'Indian Woman', as her image exists in Indian society, in the heroines and female characters of the Hindi cinema (2001). Although I do not purport any direct or simple correspondence between representations in filmic narratives and everyday experiences, I do presume a kind of relationship between media representations and social reality. This relationship extends to suppose that if a marked change in strategies of representation is noted to gain audience approval as never before, a corresponding change may be taking place in spheres other than the mass media alone. For this reason, I have chosen to examine the binary-eliding heroine of the most popular Hindi films of the 1990s, perhaps in a back-to-front stance towards reception, but nonetheless in keeping with Christopher Pinney's call for "detailed engagements with the nature of specific artefacts and the nature of the reception of different artefacts" (2001: 15).

2. The Hindi Film Industry

The commercial cinema and its offshoots have a palpable presence in India. Their manifestations extend from promotional materials to borrowed *filmī* tunes to sayings painted across the backs of auto-rickshaws, pervading the popular consciousness, both rural and urban, upper and lower middle-classes. The Hindi cinema is strongly associated to urban north India, and particularly to Bombay, where the bulk of Hindi films are produced in the affectionately termed Bollywood. Nonetheless, film viewing audiences are multiple and varied. Travelling merchants supply rural villages with film screenings and film music, and migrant workers that continue to flock to and from urban areas bring their consciousness of popular media with them as a kind of cultural baggage (Dwyer 2000, Manuel 1993).

Although the number of annual releases of Hindi films is dwarfed by the numbers of films released in other South Asian languages such as Tamil and Telugu, the Hindi cinema is still regarded as prolific, releasing approximately one film every two days (Binford 1989: 3). Some smaller-scale regional cinemas have a reputation for focussing on 'art' or 'serious'-type films rather than the implicitly pan-cultural themes of the mainstream extravaganzas, such as the Malayalam and Bengali cinemas. The excess characteristic of the Hindi film spectacle is deeply grounded in the scope of its viewership and, consequently, in its potential for generating profits. Although the hits of various regional cinemas are now being shown (dubbed or subtitled) throughout India with greater frequency, the Hindi commercial cinema is still the only popular cinema to be distributed to the all-India market on a regular basis (Binford 1989: 3).

Calling itself the mainstream and presuming an all-India base for viewership, the Hindi cinema has fashioned itself a wider address, implicitly albeit invisibly pan-Indian. The silent referents of this address, both in filmic narratives as well as in promotional materials such as fan magazines, are very often north Indian, urban and Hindu. Although the gaze referred to in the filmic visuals has been coded as implicitly male (Mulvey 2000 [1975], Prabhu 2001, Chatterji 1998), the reader of the fan magazine *Filmfare* cannot be definitively coded according to gender. Despite numerous overt references and advertisements aimed at female readers (specifically: wives), there are also recurring references to male readers, often through advertisements and suggestive photo spreads. In this study, I shall focus on the

multiple address of the Hindi cinema industry that seems to cater to several, perhaps divergent, desires.

The commercial or popular Hindi film is defined primarily by its 'money-making' aim, that is, economic success on box-office returns as the medium's *raison d'être*. The pressure for returns on a single film has become more intense since the collapse of the studio system with the outbreak of the Second World War (Garga 1995: 28). Asha Kasbekar notes that the need for commercially viable films led "[...] to an increasing dependence on successfully tried-and-tested plot lines, established actors with proven box office successes, and spectacular song and dance sequences" (2001: 288). Viewers, journalists and filmmakers often refer to the 'formula film': the elusive combination of elements that is engineered to guarantee box-office success, but most often does not.

Kasbekar goes on to observe that the popular Hindi cinema does not fall into the genre categorization characteristic of Hollywood cinema, regarding the 'formula' as a commercial strategy or as a 'something for everyone' project. Instead of fragmenting the audience, as well as box office revenue, through genres, the commercial Hindi film amalgamates socially and ethnically diverse audiences by incorporating visual pleasures from different genres into the same film (Kasbekar 2001: 289). Ashis Nandy, in the introduction to a collection of essays on Indian popular cinema, states that the impetus of the volume "... presume[s] that the Indian commercial cinema, to be commercially viable, must try to span the host of cultural diversities and epochs the society lives with, and that effort has a logic of its own" (1998: 1). It is within the specific logic of mass-mediated entertainment that is defined by its producers as a primarily commercial venture, and that seeks to address the widest possible South Asian audience, that the analysis of the Hindi film heroine shall be situated.

There are no rigid guidelines for describing a Bollywood film, but certain ingredients are nonetheless definitive. The average film is three hours long with at least five song and dance sequences. There is almost always a romantic angle to the storyline, hence the essential ingredients of the commercial cinema: the hero and the heroine. In recent years, the villain has become less apparent (Doraiswamy 1995), but this and other changes will be discussed in further detail below. Moments of high melodrama are crucial, often pitting the love interest against obligations to family/friends/nation – Patricia Uberoi refers to this

dilemma as “*dharma* vs. desire” (1997). Equally vital are the various elements that constitute *masālā* or mix of spices: violence, stunts, chases as well as eroticized movements, dances or dialogue.

Kasbekar notes the importance of the song and dance sequences as spectacles that render the ‘parts’ of a Hindi film greater than its ‘whole’ (2001: 288). Musical interludes generally serve to temporarily suspend the logic of the on-screen narrative, serving as spaces of fantasy where the characters can express emotions and feelings – through movement, music and lyric – that could not be made overt in the regular plotline because of social constraints, shyness, etc. In addition, song and dance sequences are shown on television for promotional purposes, and DVDs have a song menu that skips from one musical sequence to another, clearly indicating an emphasis on the song and dance ‘parts’ of the commercial film. Kasbekar argues that this separation of modes of representation allows the Hindi cinema to eroticize the female form while upholding the ideological and moral concerns of the society in which it circulates, that is, as a careful negotiation with government censors as well as with the limits of ‘moral respectability’ as deemed by the politically and culturally powerful middle classes (2001: 289).

A distinctive aspect of the Indian popular cinema is the use of playback singers. During a musical interlude, performers on-screen are often seen to be mouthing the lyrics. They are in fact lip-synching to a song recorded by a playback singer, or a performer specialized in singing for films. Although playback singers do not have the same image constraints as actors, they are stars in their own right, often with successful recording careers outside the film music genre. Among the most famous and the longest-standing playback singers are Lata Mangeshkar and her sister Asha Bhosle, both of whom began their careers in the 1950s at a very young age. These women continue to perform well into the 1990s and were instrumental in establishing the Bollywood aesthetic for female vocalists: a high-pitched but versatile falsetto that can simultaneously convey innocence and sensuality (Chatterjee 1995: 56-60). Although the playback singer is prominent, the songs themselves remain associated with the actors who lip-synch to them. Film music recordings can be sold in a variety of forms: according to the playback singer, according to duets of playback singers, as compilations of hit songs from recent or classic films, or as songs associated with the on-screen performances of a particular actor.

Music is considered an important factor in the production of a successful film. As such, the music director and the lyricist are considered crucial players in the filmmaking process, as the prominent display of their names in the credits and the billboards suggests. Nonetheless, critics writing in *Filmfare* from 1990 to 1999 insist that although good music is an essential ingredient in a hit film, and that popular music constitutes an important part of film revenue, hit songs do not necessarily make hit films and vice versa (Bharadwaj and Pillai 1995 in *Filmfare*: 19)¹. A typical film will include songs that are upbeat and catchy, ideal for dance sequences, as well as emotionally poetic songs, often for pining lovers. The latter type of song is often referred to as a *filmī gazal*, and is often loosely based on the Urdu genre of romantic/spiritual poetry.

The Urdu *gazal* typically takes the form of a lover's address to an absent beloved, and is often seen as an allegory for the relationship between the Muslim devotee and Allah². The *gazal* uses stock imagery and metaphors such as the moth in the flame, references to epic lovers such as Laila and Majnu, the celebration of intoxication and inebriation, etc. Peter Manuel maintains that in the popularized version of the *gazal*, especially through its usage in film, the imagery has lost its depth, being commonly understood literally rather than metaphorically (1993: 89-104). Manuel also notes the simplification of the Urdu lyrics into an increasingly accessible form of Hindi (1991). In the recent uses of the *filmī gazal*, I see a spiritualization of the 'true love' ideal that emphasizes the primacy of the 'love' emotion as conflated with sexual attraction (i.e. not the love for one's family members). In addition, the simplification of the lyrics, as well as of film dialogues, into increasingly accessible Hindi seems to constitute an additional strategy for a broad audience address, in turn indicating the diversity of the Hindi film audience.

The all-India cinema-going audience's sensibility for standards of morality and decency is purportedly protected by the state through the intermediaries constituted by the vigilant, if inconsistently so, film censors. The government-controlled Indian Censor Board is responsible for regulating and reviewing the content of each film to be released. The Board requests the changes to be made to a film, if they are required, before issuing a

¹ Please note that *Filmfare* references appear in a separate bibliography for easy consultation.

² The *gazal* has roots in Arabic and Persian poetry, and was introduced to South Asia with the arrival of Muslim court culture. The Urdu version of the Persian *gazal* emerged in the seventeenth century (Kamran 1979), and has since been appropriated into a popular musical genre, sung in various regional South Asian languages.

certificate authorizing release (Bose in Dissanayake and Gokulsing 1998: 102). The Board of Censors is often criticized in the pages of the fan magazine *Filmfare* for its inconsistencies in regulating violence, foul language, negative portrayals of politicians, sexual content and ‘double meaning’ dialogue from one film to the next³. The most famous censorship rule is the ban on kissing (on the mouth), and despite the Censor Board’s recent relaxed attitude on this point; most films of the 1990s do not include kissing scenes. The Board of Censors was initially an administrative body by which the British controlled anticolonial or politically subversive content in the Indian cinema prior to Independence in 1947. The Board of Censors remains as a means to ensure that the content of the Indian cinema does not threaten to corrupt the ‘moral standards’ that define the nation.

a. Indian cinema: sketching beginnings

The beginnings of Indian cinema carry the traces both of film as a national and nationalizing medium, as well as of the stigma of the cinema industry as shamelessly public and somehow always tainted. Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, also known as Dadasaheb Phalke, is regarded as the great forefather of contemporary popular cinema. The first Indian-made film was Phalke’s *Raja Harishchandra*⁴ released in 1913, and recounted an episode of the Mahabharata, “the narrative on the silent screen elaborated by storytellers, in a manner similar to that used for telling folk stories from scroll paintings” (Dwyer 2000:97). The director Phalke was first inspired to portray the deities of India in 1910 upon seeing a screening of *The Life of Christ*; the representative value of which was seen as didactically perpetuating a mythification of western identity, as Phalke’s remarks indicate:

While the life of Christ was rolling fast before my physical eyes I was mentally visualizing the Gods, Shri Krishna, Shri Ramachandra, their Gokul and Ayodhya. I was gripped by a strange spell. I bought another ticket and saw the film again. This time I felt my imagination taking shape on the screen. Could this really happen? Could we, the sons of India, ever be able to see Indian images on the screen? [...] There was no doubt whatsoever about the utility of the profession and its importance as an industry. [...] This was the period of the Swadeshi movement and there was profuse talking and lecturing on the subject. For me personally, this led to the resignation of my comfortable government job and taking to an independent profession. (cited in Roy 1998:164).

³ See the section ‘On exposure and ‘vulgar’ performances’ in Chapter 5.

⁴ Industry transliterations of film and song titles use Roman spelling for film covers and soundtracks. These do not use phonetic characters, and consequently long vowels may or may not be indicated by double vowels, and the letter ‘N’ most often indicates nasalized vowels. Except in the transliteration of dialogue and Hindi terms, I will follow the conventions of the Hindi film industry when citing film and song titles.

Not only does Phalke make a distinct link between the power of filmic imagery and the anticolonial struggle for independence through *swadeśī* (transl. indigenous to India) content (Nair 1995: 3), but it also seems he drew from a folk tradition of storytelling as well as unquestionably *swadeśī* (Hindu) mythology, to effectively indigenize/nationalize the filmic medium.

In addition, Phalke could not convince any women to agree to act in his production. According to legend, apparently even courtesans and prostitutes would not agree to being displayed on-screen for mass audiences. *Raja Harishchandra* was filmed with an all-male cast. Phalke's daughter, Mandakini Phalke, became the first Indian actress (Nair 1995: 7). From Phalke's beginnings we can trace the prominence of several elements in the contemporary commercial cinema: First, the importance of mythology as a referent and the 'mythological' as a film genre; second, the impetus of the Indian cinema as a medium for mythifying the nation; third, the use of filmic representation as a means of cultural legitimation (Dwyer 2000: 96), seeking to determine the terms of *swadeśī*; fourth, the practice of hybridizing multiple influences from various performance traditions (Dissanayake and Gokulsing 1998: 17-22), and; fifth, the stigma of questionable (sexual) respectability on women associated with the film industry. The final point will form the core of this study, and will be informed by the additional points mentioned above.

b. Commercial Hindi cinema in the 1990s: new narrative strategies

With regard to a transformed female protagonist who has become distinct enough from previous trends that a film critic notes several examples by 1992, Khanna observes that

[...] the powerful yet idealistic heroine would appear to reflect the mood of the times. She is more rational and pragmatic rather than aggressive and angry. Of-course, woman-oriented films still tend to portray her as a kind of Lone Ranger waging a *jehad* against foul villains. But if that image distorts the role of a woman in modern-day society, perhaps the 'softer approach' says it better. It is not a perfect picture, by a long shot, but the more restrained heroine is at least a corrective to that other extreme of portraying the woman as a Sati Savitri [*sic*]. (Khanna 1992a: 18)

That Khanna refers to the 'new' heroine of the 1990s as embodying the 'softer approach' is the most interesting part of the above statement. The 'corrective' invokes a 'distortion' of plausibility, indicating that the Hindi film industry is growing to vie for realism in its representations, that the audience also expects a degree of realistic believability, and that

‘restrained’ stereotypes are more accurate proponents of realism. The codes of ‘realism’ described are not limited to the heroine’s role, although Khanna’s discussion focuses on the female protagonist. Several narrative strategies that were marked in the blockbuster films of the 1990s reinforce the perception of on-screen spectacle as a forum for playing out the anxieties and desires of its audiences, providing a ‘softer approach’ in several respects.

The most popular films of the 1990s focussed on ‘family values’ within the ‘romantic’ genre, and took on quite distinct characteristics in the latter part of the decade. Rachel Dwyer describes the Hindi cinema as a site of contestation for cultural legitimacy: the commercial cinema is seen both as manifesting a mixture of class tastes as well as a site where what she terms the ‘new middle classes’ are establishing their cultural hegemony, especially in the filmic depiction of the couple and the bourgeois family (2000: 102). Rashmi Doraiswamy notes several new narrative strategies emerging in the commercial Hindi cinema of the 1990s (1995). She notes, for example, that flashbacks are used with increasing frequency, often disrupting the classic construction of the linear narrative, and that villains are more ambiguously ‘villainous’ than in previous decades, challenging the logic of Bollywood’s on-screen standards of morality. Doraiswamy describes the humorous role that the villain often assumes, undermining the gravity of his/her (most often his) threat, as well as the intimacy that the narrative accords to the villain, allowing evil forces to move in the same spaces as the hero and heroine do, or by showing the villain with his/her own family, with similar social obligations and social roles as the other protagonists (1995: 175-8). She also observes that the villain, rather than laden with connotations of foreign involvement and technological modernity, is framed as entirely ‘made in India’:

In fact, the new villain is totally an indigenous product. The less modern he is, the more involved he is in the corruption as it exists in the law-enforcing agencies of the state, the more convincing he is. (Doraiswamy 1995: 177-8)

Notably, in many of the most popular films of the 1990s – including *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!* (1994, dir. Sooraj Barjatya), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995, dir. Aditya Chopra), *Dil To Pagal Hai* (1997, dir. Yash Chopra), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998, dir. Karan Johar), *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999, dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali) – the presence of the archetypal villain is absent. Instead, plotlines depend largely on filmic coincidence and focus primarily on romantic love and the integrity of the family. In some cases, the social

convention, intimacy and sense of duty associated with the family are extended into forms of village, regional or patriotic solidarity.

Virtually every Hindi film can be called 'romantic' due to the mandatory love relationship between hero and heroine that assumes various degrees of importance, depending on the plotline of a given film. Although Rachel Dwyer associates the 'romantic genre' primarily to the films of established director Yash Chopra in the course of her analysis of romance in the Hindi commercial cinema, the characteristics ascribed to the 'Yash Chopra romance' are largely applicable to many of the hit films of the 1990s:

Although Yash Chopra's films depict romantic love in many forms, they always uphold the sanctity of the family, albeit an idealized, 'modernized' nuclear family whose members are all friends who can discuss personal matters freely. The plots of his romances concentrate almost exclusively on emotions; there are no social themes other than those which affect love and the family. Evildoers feature only rarely; it is circumstances and emotions which dislocate people's lives. (Dwyer 2000: 150)

Despite the assertion that many, if not the majority, of 1990s blockbuster films correspond to a model where romance and human relationships are at the forefront of the narrative plotline, the relationships depicted on-screen do not always plausibly distinguish between emotional and physical love, a distinction once crucial for establishing the morality of a female protagonist. This tendency appears to follow what Steven Seidman refers to as the 'eroticization of love and the romanticization of sex' (in Puri 1999: 126), as employed by Jyoti Puri in her study of middle-class urban Indian women and their relationship to their own sexuality (1999). Rachel Dwyer also notes that the 'realism' of the Bollywood cinema, in terms of the codes used by Ien Ang regarding Hollywood and television soap operas, can be best equated to an 'emotional realism', where emotions are emphasized above all else through the melodramatic form (2000: 107). While emotional turmoil is one of the staples of the Bollywood melodrama, intimacy is not limited to romantic relationships, but is extended with equally strong pulls towards familial and conjugal love.

Despite emotionally-defined on-screen ties, Patricia Uberoi asserts that the filmic family and the lover constitute icons of the dilemma between *dharma* (or social obligation/duty to friends, relatives, etc.) and desire: "[...] the function of many of the convoluted plots of Hindi commercial cinema [is] to mediate the tension between social duty and individual desire" (1997: 155). Eva Illouz notes that romantic love in the West is imbued with a sense of transgression (1997: 8), while Uberoi observes that in South Asia 'love

marriages' (as opposed to parentally arranged marriages) are understood to undermine parental authority, caste-based social order and reciprocity between affines. She also asserts that love marriages are seen as unions in defiance of the notion of destiny that link (Hindu) individuals through several lifetimes, invoking individual freedom as a contestation of the destiny that is understood to be governed by *dharma* (Uberoi 1997: 155). In the classic romantic hits of the commercial Hindi cinema – the films mentioned above are no exception:

[...] the aspect of sexual attraction that underlies romantic love and invests it with danger should be domesticated and transformed in the course of the film narrative into the idiom of *dharma* [*sic*]: of protection and self-sacrificing service. [...] unalloyed free choice, without these other mediations, is usually a prescription for doom – cognitive and commercial. (Uberoi 1997: 155)

The implication is that filmic coincidence and narrative plotline suffice to transform the most potentially transgressive of on-screen romantic relationships, through circumstances facilitating their union such as parental consent or an arranged spouse 'freeing' their partner from social obligation. In several hits of the 1990s, although the ultimate coming together of the hero and heroine is taken by both the plotline and viewing audiences as inevitable, their definitive union is made possible exclusively by the social sanction of a third party: often the hero and heroine have quietly acceded to familial or social expectations in dutiful self-effacement until filmic coincidence and gracious characters have seen and understood the romantic love that overrides all other on-screen concerns.

Despite the show of *dharma* superseding desire in the film narrative – at least until the culmination, where appropriate transformations collapse the distinctions between duty and desire – an eroticism apparently unhindered by moralistic considerations began to first pervade song and dance sequences, then the rest of the plotline throughout the 1990s. Although Anil Khanna observes that "[...] the self-sacrificing heroine appears to have made a grand comeback [...]" (1992a: 17), Doraiswamy notes the increasingly aggressive sexuality in both the songs and dances of the 1990s, citing sexually explicit poses and movements as well as the 'double-meaning' lyrics of songs as part of the heroine "[...] tak[ing] on several functions of the vamp of yesteryears" (1995: 171, 181-2). The result is a heroine whose overt display of sexuality through her boldness, her clothing and her apparent independence seems unencumbered by the implications of a loose sexual morality that burdened both the classic idealized heroine, whose modesty and impeccable morality prevented any show of bold

eroticism, and the vamp, whose enactment of eroticism immediately doomed her sexual morality and thus, her marriageable status.

In a complex combination of dutiful social conformity and an informed agency that includes an overtly expressed but apparently morally inconsequential sexuality, the dancing heroine figures transformed notions of acceptable femininity. She heralds notions of sexual morality as a reciprocal referent to South Asian gender and sexual politics, as represented through the mass-mediated, commercial Hindi cinema's enacting of anxieties and desires, of "[...] aspects of life that matter" to their viewing audiences (Dyer 1987: 19). This study, however, rather than taking detailed account of reception narratives that chronicle the viewing audience's versions of what aspects of life that matter to them are enacted on-screen, begins instead by examining the narrative and media representations of what is constructed as mattering to an all-India audience. Tejaswini Ganti has studied filmmakers' construction of their viewing audiences through their strategies and negotiations in 'Indianizing' a Hollywood film/screenplay for the Hindi cinema (2002), but I focus on the representation of femininity and female sexuality through the on-screen/off-screen film heroine, through the commercially successful narrative strategies in the blockbusters of the 1990s, and through the multiple media representations in the interview with heroines in the English-language fan magazine *Filmfare*. In order to examine the dancing heroine in the Hindi film industry, I must first examine the iconography of female protagonists that mediate her figuring.

3. Women in Hindi films

This project addresses the female protagonists in the Hindi cinema that are defined by their roles, ages, specific sexuality and social status as potential wives. I will not address the female protagonists figured as mothers, firstly because the mother figure deals with a particular complex of sexuality and iconography to which audiences and on-screen characters relate to differently than the potential or childless young wife. Secondly, the mother figure can neither be easily conflated with the star image of the heroine as an object of heterosexual desire, nor is she easily projected onto filmic fantasies of love and romance that have formed the crux of the blockbusters of the 1990s. Finally, although a mother is considered a potentially powerful figure, she also refers implicitly to the controlled sexuality of the married (versus the unmarried) woman. For a young heroine to take on a role as a mother or mother-in-law early on in her career is considered a faux pas in the Hindi film industry, as countless interview questions to heroines in the magazine *Filmfare* attest. I shall focus on the on-screen female characters that are vehicles for acceptable notions of (comparatively, potentially) uncontrolled sexuality, latent in their youth, their dancing (both literally and figuratively) and their roles as lovers or objects of desire.

The issue of controlled female sexuality as equated with marital status has been explored in several studies on gender patriarchal power structures. With regard to South Asia, Lynn E. Gatwood's study *Devi and the Spouse Goddess* examines controlled (i.e. by a Hindu god as a consort or husband) versus uncontrolled or independent female sexuality on a mythological and devotional level, noting that the 'spouse goddesses' are attributed less power and appear as either benevolent or malicious, whereas the independent goddesses are attributed a greater power that is more ambivalent in its orientation (1985). In addition, Carol Upadhyia, in a critique of the Hindu political right's opposition to Deepa Mehta's 1998 film *Fire*, links controlled female sexuality to patriarchal power structures. She cites

[...] escalating attempts by the Hindu right to capture the space of 'culture' and redefine mainstream morality in line with its own idea of Indian society [... claiming] that the film is against 'Indian tradition' because it depicts a lesbian relationship – demonstrat[ing] that Indian 'culture' for the [Hindu right] is defined essentially in terms of male control over female sexuality. (Upadhyia 1998: 3176)

Several scandals of the 1990s, in which public opposition to standards of 'moral decency' affected the Hindi film industry, became debates assuming the national scope that Upadhyia

describes: those of 'Indian tradition' and 'culture'. The scandals were a testimony to the extent to which representations of uncontrolled female sexuality mattered to the notion of a 'pan-Indian' identity.

a. Women in Hindi films: vamps and ideal heroines

In order to trace the development of the heroine of the Hindi cinema of the 1990s, I shall trace the on-screen narrative conventions of the depiction of 'uncontrolled' female sexuality in Hindi film, beginning with the classic polarization of the vamp and the ideal heroine. The vamp is generally seen as projecting a female sexuality that allows guilt-free voyeurism, but that is negatively coded in terms of sexual morality. The vamp is typically associated with promiscuity, erotic display and the on-screen villain, either as an entertainer or as the female fixture at the villain's den. She is never married and is associated to other hallmarks of decadence for women: smoking, alcohol and unashamedly seductive dancing. Her character is rarely well developed or pivotal to the plot, and is often conveniently disposed of in the course of the narrative (Kasbekar 2001: 299). The vamp functions as the antithesis of the chaste, marriageable heroine. She is associated with 'foreign' elements, either as an overwesternized stereotype, as a (non-Hindu) Christian or Anglo-Indian, or as a performer in 'foreign' dens (Kasbekar 2001: 298-9). Being a counterpoint for the ideal and socially acceptable sexuality of the classic heroine as a potential wife, the vamp embodies the 'bad girl', full of sterile sexuality and deliberately excluded from the domestic space (Uberoi 1997: 155). As such, the coherence of the vamp is dependent upon the ideal heroine. Conversely, an analysis examining the collapsing of the two roles is best understood in terms of the binary opposition that informs it.

Filmfare journalists consistently maintain that issues of female sexuality faced fewer on-screen taboos in the silent era. For example, they note that kissing – upon which an unspoken ban persisted into the 1990s – was commonplace in silent films (Bhattacharya 1993 in *Filmfare*). An unattributed 1992 article asserts that after Independence in 1947, especially, the importance of distinctly *swadesī* content as an aspect of an ascendant Indian nationalism led to stricter and more sanitized images of female sexuality (Unattributed 1992 in *Filmfare*: 33-4). Partha Chatterjee phrases this idea differently, as a softer transition, where the ideal heroine or 'snow-white virgin' was a figure "[...] made necessary by people

who had lived through [...] the carnage of partition” (1995: 57). He sees the canonization of the ideal heroine as a response to the doubts and anxieties felt with regard to the nation and nationhood, as well as part of a compensatory aftermath of the “sins” of Partition that made a character figuring a reinvented nostalgia of hope and innocence necessary. Using the rise of popularity of Lata Mangeshkar’s voice as a playback singer that would dominate the Hindi film scene at least until the 1990s, Chatterjee invokes the aesthetics of an attractive innocence in the ideal female sexuality of the Hindi cinema (1995: 57). He notes that key actors and filmmakers

[...] very quietly and effectively launched the cult of virgin worship. The heroine, regardless of her outer trappings of sensuality, had to convey to the viewer her virginal purity; there was no question of her asserting her sexuality. In its most open and healthy form sex in films was taboo and could only be smuggled in as a necessary evil. (Chatterjee 1995: 56)

The most important feature of the ideal heroine is her marriageable quality, her status as a potential or actual wife through the course of a filmic narrative. Her corresponding restrained sexuality – both in terms of the heroine’s own self-control as well as restricted by her family - as connoted by her virginity and domesticity, allows the ideal heroine’s particular manifestation of female sexuality to be coded positively. The ideal heroine, and thus the ideal potential wife, is also projected as loyal and dutiful, whose fertile sexuality will/should eventually lead to her role as a fulfilled mother (Uberoi 1997: 155). These developments in a projected ideal wifely trajectory do not necessarily feature in the film’s narrative. Marriage and eventual motherhood are, however, the assumed and ideal outcomes of any on-screen romance between protagonists. The redeeming qualities of the ideal heroine’s particular sexuality with regard to both sexual morality and notions of middle-class respectability classically depend on the integrity of her *lāj* (chastity/honour), which is in turn closely linked to the pliability of her character to the role of the dutiful and devoted daughter/wife/mother/ daughter-in-law.

b. Women in Hindi films: dancing heroines

The polarization between what Shoma A. Chatterji refers to as the marrying and the un-marrying kinds of women (1998) inform the filmic iconography of uncontrolled female sexuality as represented through the figures of the ideal heroine and the vamp in the Hindi cinema. However, as Patricia Uberoi notes, the conceptual and institutionalized separation of

the wife and courtesan figures (read: ideal heroine and vamp) in South Asian society changed under efforts of the urban bourgeoisie to refashion the ideal of Indian marriage according to the Victorian model of companionability, thus allowing for a widened space for romance and sexuality within, but not outside of, the context of marital relations (1997: 154). Eventually, through several significant precedents, the typically docile ideal heroine began to take on aspects of the vamp's assertive sexuality. Mukul Kesavan sees this change as embodied by the increasingly overtly sexual performances of the ideal female protagonist, calling her, quite literally, the "dancing heroine" (1994: 254-5).

Although the transformation of the heroine's expression of her own sexuality is striking in the 1990s, pervading the film narrative, important precedents render the heroine-vamp binary ambiguous. For example, Rachel Dwyer notes that the rise of Indian youth culture in the 1960s introduced an overtly modern style into the commercial Hindi cinema, where "spectacle triumphed over realism" (2000:122):

The glamorous new heroine who combined the roles of heroine and vamp was typified by Sharmila Tagore, a discovery of Satyajit Ray: glamorous, liberated yet refined, elegant and traditional. Even though she was one of the first actresses to appear in a bikini [*An Evening in Paris*, dir. S.Samanta, 1967] she seemed to be above any criticism. [...] Models and 'Miss Indias' began to enter the films as 'babes' who typified new ways and new lifestyles through their performances in cabaret and dance numbers, looking good in skimpy western clothes. This trend has continued. (2000:123)

The above citation refers to the ongoing controversial issue of heroines 'exposing' by wearing bathing suits or bikinis, either on-screen or for photo shoots. In addition, Dwyer mentions the crucial element of performance during musical interludes that allows 'realistic' narratives to be broken by fantasies of song and dance, thus permitting the heroine to momentarily forsake her idealized role.

Asha Kasbekar describes the significance of song and dance interludes for the heroine:

In the Hindi cinema, the staged performance allows the performing woman to bring a powerful and sexually-aggressive identity into existence. Temporarily disregarding the self-sacrificing and idealized straitjacket imposed on her by patriarchal society, the woman assumes command of her body and defiantly acts out her own desires. (2001:305)

However, although the dancing heroines are implicitly referenced by Dwyer as non-representative objects of relatively uncomplicated heterosexual desire (" 'babes' [...] looking good in skimpy western clothes.") and by Kasbekar as subversively sexualized women

("[...] defiantly act[ing] out her own desires."), film critic Anil Khanna focuses on the "grand comeback" of the self-sacrificing heroine in the 1990s, "[...] almost as a backlash to feminism" (1992a: 17). Khanna reminds us that the new Hindi film heroine of the 1990s had not become the vamp, but had amalgamated aspects of the vamp's image into her own role, while reasserting the stylized auras of 'tradition' and an ideal Hindu *lāj*.

Although Khanna's statement regarding the new heroine as a reaction to feminism requires an extra-filmic examination of the notion of the 'new Indian woman' (to be discussed below), 'feminism' in the context of 1990s Indian film carries an additional explanation. In terms of the commercial Hindi cinema, by using the term 'feminism' Khanna refers to the 'avenging women' that were a staple of the popular films of the 1980s and early 1990s. He contrasts the idealistic heroines who act as new wives or aspiring brides in the blockbusters of 1991 with the far more unrealistic (and cynical) female fighter pilots and police officers that are violated early on in the plot, and spend the remainder of the film hunting down their aggressors "[...] on a castrating spree" (1992a: 18). In these films the hero is typically less prominent, and the heroine compensates for the *masālā* and action sequences usually reserved for the male protagonist. She displays an aggressive femininity, but her sexuality is projected as her downfall, weakness as well as an instigator: the heroine is often raped or abused before retaliating with the force of a mythic *devī* (transl. goddess).

Leading up to the 1980s role of the avenging woman were the 'new women' of the 1970s who, rather than mere "decorative lovers", were fiercely independent and willing "to fight alongside their men" (Basu *et. al.* in Kasbekar 2001: 300-1). They wore clothes hitherto worn only by the vamp and executed erotic dance sequences that used to be the prerogative of the seductress (Kasbekar 2001: 301). Nonetheless, they seemed to remain resolutely unaware of their own sexuality, as typified by the mini-skirted then-newcomer Dimple Kapadia in the 1973 film *Bobby* (dir. Raj Kapoor) as she asks her future lover innocently "*Mujhse dostī karoge?*" (transl. 'Will you be my friend?') (Dwyer 2000: 139). Despite vampish trappings, the modesty and chastity of the heroine were upheld.

Various narrative strategies were used to 'justify' the vampish exterior of the heroine or her assertiveness towards male peers. The co-ed college campus, for example, not only referred to an increasingly educated middle-class, but also inferred the possibility of negotiating gender relations with minimal supervision by elders and family, providing a

convenient venue for elements of youth culture such as the occasional dance competition. The heroine was also cast as a professional of the performing arts, referencing the increased independence associated to working women while allowing the heroine's narrative occupation to rationalize her on-screen performances without jeopardizing her virtue (Kasbekar 2001: 301). These narrative strategies indicate that the sexual morality and respectability of the female protagonist were rendered malleable within specific contexts that referred to the politics of gender and sexuality. It is the particular contexts that the Hindi film heroine inhabits, both on- and off-screen, that I will trace as a means to evoke the particular dynamics of feminine sexuality in the commercial Hindi cinema.

c. The 'New Indian Woman'

The figuring of the dancing heroine through the off-screen/on-screen Hindi film heroine parallels, that of a more broadly applicable sociological icon: the 'new Indian woman'. The term, as used in media and official discourse, refers to

[...] a construction which serves not only to reconcile in her [i.e. the new Indian woman's] subjectivity the conflicts between tradition and modernity in Indian society, but works also to deny the actual conflict that women existentially register as an aspect of their lives. (Sunder Rajan 1993:129)

This reductionistically represented negotiation of notions of 'tradition' and 'modernity', terms reconstructed for the purposes of rendering the stakes of identity formation coherent and believable, downplays the complexity of the processes of negotiation, focussing instead on the well-adjusted finished product, the new woman. Although the dancing heroine seems to fall under the rubric of the 'new woman', her specific manifestation in the popular mass media, as both a star and as multiple narrative characters who are thought of as eroticized objects of (heterosexual) desire, places an emphasis on the spectacle of sexuality that may often be elided in other official representations of femininity. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan elaborates on the semiotic importance of the Indian woman as a carrier/saviour of 'modernization-without-westernization':

It is only the female subject who can be shown as successfully achieving balance between (deep) tradition and (surface) modernity, through strategies of representation..." (1993: 133)

The dancing heroine continues to follow this trajectory, where what is 'new' may or may not be immediately coded as 'Western', depending on the laudatory or disparaging intent of the supporter/critic. Instead, the heroine's renegotiations appear to be contingent on the extent to which the transformed (read: 'modern') model of femininity can be assimilated into perceptions of previous (read: 'traditional'), positively coded, models. In addition, the national label of the 'new Indian woman' parallels the all-India address of the commercial Hindi cinema, effacing regional concerns in pursuit of representing 'pan-Indian culture'.

Rather than figuring a feminism that is perceived as aggressive and antagonistic, the dancing heroine figures a renegotiation of investments of desire and notions of respectability by reworking the politics of sexual morality within the limits of possibility that heterosexuality, and by extension heteronormativity, allows. Instead of a break with, or complete transgression of, what are understood to be conventional models of Indian femininity, the dancing heroine embodies what Anil Khanna refers to as the "softer approach" (1992a: 18). As Judith Butler notes, the conventional view of agency seems to require thinking about persons "[...] as instrumental actors who confront an external political field" (in Sunder Rajan 1993: 138). Although the figure of the dancing heroine may be confrontational, the heroine that figures her seldom professes to be so, and eases the transformed model of femininity into acceptability. That "[...] feminism is no longer a politically correct term in India [...]" and has been rendered alien and irrelevant (Sunder Rajan 1993: 138), indicates the abandoning of the confrontational model in mainstream representations of femininity.

The heroines in the films of the 1990s are only mildly confrontational in comparison to their avenging counterparts of the 1980s. The newer heroines situate the renegotiation of their femininity and sexuality within prescribed (ideal) models: heterosexuality, *dharma*, wife-mother trajectory, and *lāj* or honour/chastity as part of the iconicity of Indian femininity. These ideas interpellate 'India' as manifested in commercial Hindi films and in mass-disseminated print media, providing an entry point for concurrently examining multiple modes of representation. Accordingly, the heroine that is simultaneously narrative character and star image shall be examined in terms of on-screen/off-screen dynamics, as she dances amongst the two.

4. On-screen, Off-screen: stardom, gender and performance

The colloquial Hindi adjective *filmī*, referring to that which is linked or associated to the film world or *filmī dunīyā*, denotes the dual logic of the Bollywood cinema constituted by film narrativity and the star system. This study examines how these two modes of representation crosscut one another, as considered through the figuring of the *filmī* heroine. I have argued that the heroines of the 1990s present, according to the respective yet intertwined logics of the off-screen/on-screen, transformed notions of acceptable femininity, which they ardently defend, define and in a manner of speaking, 'sell' to their public with the complicity of the industry.

Many issues besides gender and sexuality are referenced in the popular Hindi cinema, notably class structure, social responsibility, and the question of justifying the power structures of elders and/or institutions. Patricia Uberoi's rubric of *dharma* and desire, destiny and freedom, provides a useful viewing tool in regarding the logic of the popular film narrative, in which the social obligation of *dharma* and the notion of passive destiny are intertwined, whereas the concepts of freedom and desire resonate with the transgressivity of breaching the social order, or the sequence of events that was supposed to occur, interfering with multiple destinies in the process (1997). While the body of a particular plotline may tell a different story, Uberoi argues (1997), the resolution of a narrative depends on the reconciliation of the concerns of *dharma*, desire, destiny and freedom. Although Uberoi's rubric may affect much of a given film's narrative structure, I shall consider issues of femininity and uncontrolled sexuality, as they evoke the politics of gender, morality and middle-class respectability in the popular Hindi cinema of the 1990s.

The contention that references to sexual morality in the Hindi film industry necessarily, if implicitly, invoke the politics of gender and gendering is sustained not only by the filmic iconography of femininity, which revolves around references to sexual morality, but is also apparent in the interviews with heroines in the magazine *Filmfare* between 1990 and 1999. The female protagonists made reference to common notions of female iconography in the films viewed (27 of the 50 viewed were released in the 1990s). Transitions in popular concerns and limits of sexual respectability are notably present in films from different periods, taking into account the diverse economies of viewing that

allowed for the variability in the composition and preferences of the all-India cinema-going audience. The most successful films of the 1990s are strikingly different from previous periods in the placement of the heroine in narrative plotlines. In addition, certain prior conventions, such as suicides and rape scenes (e.g. Chatterji 1998, Prabhu 2001), are shown with considerably less frequency through the course of the 1990s.

Although the issues and transformations that arising in films are not directly representative of the concerns raised by heroines in their magazine interviews of the same period, important similarities and divergences indicate that the on-screen/off-screen relationship could be explored through a comparative approach. Despite the breadth of the time frame and the quantity of interviews consulted (on average, three per monthly issue per year from 1990-1999 = ca.360 interviews), the concerns and issues raised by both the journalists and the actresses in their interviews are remarkably consistent throughout the ten-year period. In addition, all the issues that were discussed with frequency were linked to matters of sexual morality and the 'uncontrolled' or independent (hetero)sexuality of the film actress. The transformations of the Hindi film heroine seem to be based in a strategy of renegotiation of the terms of respectability and sexual morality that defines female iconography according to the logic of Bollywood.

a. Star Theory, Star Texts

An analysis of the reciprocal relationship between the on-screen and off-screen modes of representation in the commercial Hindi film industry requires an understanding of the film star and the workings of star texts. Instances where narrative and off-screen aspects of heroines overlap or meld into one another must be informed by a closer engagement with star theory and star texts. Richard Dyer's work on Hollywood film stars and the politics of representation has pioneered the analysis of stars and stardom (e.g. 1973, 1987, 1998 [1979], 2002 [1993]). He describes the stardom as a social and socially signifying phenomenon: "Stars matter because they act out aspects of life that matter to us; and performers get to be stars when what they act out matters to enough people" (1987: 19). In addition, I assert that Hindi film heroines of the 1990s are consciously complicit in the strategic construction/negotiation of their own star texts as 'acting out things that matter to enough people'. Dyer asserts that the star image is produced through media and personal

appearances, noting the integral role of “images of the manufacture of that ‘image’ and of the real person who is the site or occasion of it” (1987:8). Although the media constructs an intimacy with the star as getting closer to the ‘real person’ behind the ‘image’ (1987), the star is known only through the media texts in which s/he appears, and as such cannot exist as a ‘real person’ through media texts, but instead as a signifier of something embodied by and yet beyond his or her own star text (1998[1979]). The decades preceding the 1990s show important and complex instances of semiotic slippage between on-screen and off-screen star personas in the commercial Hindi cinema.

b. Gender and performance

It is crucial to understand that the public display of femininity through performance, and by inference feminine sexuality, undermines the restriction of domesticity that ensures the protection of female honour/chastity or modesty. Female performers, especially dancers, are conventionally seen as women whose link to middle-class respectability is at best, questionable. *Devadāsīs* or temple dancers, despite having the status of being wedded to a deity, were women whose ‘dangerous’, uncontrolled and undomesticated sexuality led to nineteenth-century Indian reformers campaigning against the *devadāsīs* and their ‘loose morality’ (Apffel Marglin 1985). *Tawā’ifs* or courtesans, despite being the principle guardians of performing arts (dance, poetry, song) after the decline of royal court culture, were equally associated with their roles as companions, mistresses and performers at venues whose only visitors were men who paid for all services rendered (conversation, dance, sexual favours) (Oldenburg 1991). Often referred to by the ‘respectable’ classes as prostitutes, courtesans were instrumental in establishing a classicized ‘high culture’ of the fine arts in South Asia. Although courtesans had notoriously refused to suffer the indignity of performing on-screen for the first Indian film, D.G. Phalke’s *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), the first gramophone recordings were *gazel*-songs by famous courtesans, some of the first Indian actresses were courtesans (Manuel 1991), and the courtesan film is one of the most long-standing genres of both heroine-centred and Muslim social films (Chakravarty 1996).

The film heroine is linked to notions of compromised sexual morality and thus questionable respectability through her association with public performance. The overt display of herself, her body and her sexuality to an indiscriminate audience through on-

screen performance, posters, billboards and photo spreads in various media in which intimacy, rather than modesty, is emphasized, invites the scopophilic¹ gaze. Although connotations may dictate that the gaze invited is one of male heterosexual desire, it is primarily the element of display – rather than the details of how one is displayed (to be discussed below) – that most clearly, forcefully implies the compromise of sexual morality. To aggravate this situation, heroines act out intimacy or ‘make love’ to different heroes in each film. For each instance of (feigned) intimacy, the heroine is remunerated monetarily, thus reinforcing the sense of ‘prostituting’ and implying an independent, uncontrolled as well as unattached sexuality off-screen.

In many cases, the heroine’s profession is not considered a respectable one. On several occasions, heroines, journalists and families of heroines make reference to the liminality of an actress whose occupation consists of feigning intimacy and performing desirability. It becomes clear, then, that negotiating sexual respectability is of primary concern for heroines who embody the collapse of the vamp-ideal heroine binary. The stakes of gender politics, double standards and the narrative iconography of sexualized intimacy, are neither equally applicable for all performers, nor for all female actresses in Hindi films. The performances of heroes and other actresses do not involve the same stakes of sexual morality that affect the heroine: for example, women playing mothers or sister-in-laws have a greater claim to respectability than heroines.

Kajol, a popular heroine of the 1990s whose mother, Tanuja, was a famous actress of the 1960s and 1970s, exclaims that she does not enjoy watching her mother’s films: “I hate watching my mother’s films. I can’t stand her howling and crying or even hugging some strange man” (Pillai 1996b in *Filmfare*). Many actresses are daughters or relatives of once-famous film stars; *Filmfare* implies that these families accept and understand show business, having produced or accepted film actors into their fold. In the 1990s, more daughters from ‘film families’, in proportion to sons, entered the industry than ever before (Mukherjee, R. 1992c in *Filmfare*: 9)². Several stars of the period, however, made claims of rising from the ranks of ‘regular, middle-class families’ (e.g. Madhuri Dixit, Manisha Koirala, Aishwarya

¹ Scopophilia is defined by Laura Mulvey as the pleasure of looking, of the (assumed as heterosexual, male, sexually desirous) gaze. See Mulvey, Laura. 2000 [1975] “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” in *Feminism & Film*. E. Ann Kaplan, ed. Oxford: Blackwell: 34-47.

² See also special issue: *Filmfare* February 1991.

Rai). The heroines emphasized their upstanding status; they seemed determined to avert any stigma and furthermore, to defiantly reclaim their respectability despite their overt, performed sexuality.

Films

Approximately fifty Hindi films were viewed for the purposes of this project³. Of these films, twenty-seven were released between 1990 and 1999. I allowed myself some leeway in my viewing practices, and saw a few classics to familiarize myself with the canon of the Hindi cinema (e.g. *Awaara*, *Pakeeza*). In addition, in order to contextualize my analysis and argument for the popular Hindi films of the 1990s, I viewed several blockbusters of the periods immediately before as well as after the 1990s, and also viewed several films from my target period that did not achieve commercial success, but had been accorded critical acclaim (e.g. *Lamhe*, *Mrityudand*). I watched films of the 1980s (e.g. *Tezaab*, *Maine Pyaar Kiya*) as well as films released after 1999 (e.g. *Dil Chahta Hai*, *Tumko Na Bhool Payenge*).

Because this study seeks to further examine the figuring of a transformed notion of acceptable femininity through the Hindi film heroine, I have focused on the blockbusters that most clearly convey this figuring. The dancing heroine is neither discernable in all the films of the 1990s, nor apparent in every hit film. She is, however, a fixture in the most successful films of the decade, notably in *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!*, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Dil To Pagal Hai*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* as well as in the significant 1989 precedent *Maine Pyaar Kiya*. The above-named films of the 1990s feature confident, independent-minded, unhesitating heroines whose sex appeal is not portrayed as undermining the morality (or marriageability) of their characters. The transformation of the ideal heroine is well established and stylized in the above-named films, facilitating a description of her new figuring.

All the films used for this study were obtained from local businesses specializing in the rental of Hindi films. The selection of the films viewed greatly depended on their availability at these establishments. Several films were either damaged, not in stock, or had been sold out. The most successful commercial films were chosen by cross-referencing the

³ See filmography for complete list of references.

nominees for the annual 'people's choice' *Filmfare* awards with reviews in *Filmfare* and in the industry magazine *Cinema in India*, with several sources (e.g. Dwyer 2000, Prabhu 2001, Uberoi 1997, 2001), as well as with the valuable opinions of the video rental clerks and owners. I took notes summarizing the plotlines and the important aspects of each film. All the films cited in this study have been viewed on multiple occasions.

Although the technical details of individual shots and film sequences could provide additional support to this study, I will avoid the intricacies of film analysis to focus instead on the general plotline and the important turning points in the narrative that indicate a renegotiation of the status of the Hindi film heroine. I shall examine the manner in which the transformation of the heroine is integrated into the logic of the Bollywood blockbuster (Nandy 1998: 1). In doing so, this study presumes that the image of the heroine in the most popular films has been 'bought into' by an all-India audience, bringing pleasure to viewers and reflecting the investments of their desires.

Filmfare

At least 120 interviews with Hindi film heroines were read for the purposes of this project. Approximately three interviews per monthly issue of *Filmfare* between 1990 and 1999 were consulted. In addition, several reviews, special features and interviews with celebrities other than heroines were consulted. *Filmfare* is an English-language fan magazine or glossy that focuses on the Hindi cinema. It is published in Bombay by the Times of India newspaper group and, founded in 1952, is one of the oldest publications of its kind that has not yet folded (Dwyer 2000: 172).

Combining film journalism with gossipy coverage of film stars and their glamorous lifestyles, *Filmfare* constitutes a mode of representation midway between the industry trade magazines such as *Cinema in India*, that focus almost exclusively on serious film journalism, and the downmarket vernacular magazines that are printed on cheaper paper, feature fewer photos, are often weeklies, and have a lower cover price (Dwyer 2000: 173). Rachel Dwyer provides a detailed description of the English-language fan magazine *Stardust*, which is very similar to *Filmfare*, but concentrates more clearly on gossip and salacious scandals (2000: 168-98). She notes the complicated and multi-referential use of 'Hinglish' or 'Bombay English': "a mixture of non-standard varieties of English with the odd Hindi, Marathi or

Gujarati word or phrase inserted” (Dwyer 2000: 182). Rather than strictly in English, *Filmfare*’s content is riddled with transliterations of Hindi, most often italicized, including the names of films and snippets within an interview. However, the ‘Hinglish’ and code switching that is prominently apparent in the *Filmfare* issues of the late 1990s is less widely and less playfully used in the issues of 1990, 1991 and 1992.

In addition, Dwyer notes the importance of advertisements in film magazines as indicative of the assumed purchasing power of its readership, as well as of class formation in India (2000: 180). The production costs of film magazines are partially covered by revenues obtained from advertising, helping to lower cover prices. Furthermore, Dwyer notes that film glossies seem to have a family readership, and are circulated among the members of a household (2000: 179). Film magazines can also be either bought or rented out for several days at a time (often for 25% of the cover price), rendering the magazine more lucrative for individual retailers, and expanding a potential readership defined exclusively by purchasing power or other demographic criteria (Dwyer 2000:180).

Its English-language content, employing a fast-paced and pop culture literate style, indicates a readership bias towards the middle or upper-middle classes who have access to the culture products referenced in *Filmfare*’s banter. The English-language content is also more easily accessible to speakers of other South Asian languages, suggesting an all-India readership. However, Rachel Dwyer notes that several regional editions of *Filmfare* are published in English with increased coverage of local film industries, and remarks that the Bombay edition carries voting pages for the ‘people’s choice’ *Filmfare* Awards for Marathi cinema (2000: 173)⁴.

Many aspects of *Filmfare* changed considerably in the ten years between 1990 and 1999. Notably illustrative of a burgeoning consumer culture were the consistently raised cover prices, jumping from Rs10 in 1990 to Rs25 in 1999, and the glossier paper quality, high-resolution photo quality as well as the increasingly sophisticated layouts. Whereas the magazine covers do not seem to display more heroes than heroines or vice versa with any regularity, cover photos featuring on-screen couples appeared with increasing frequency beginning in 1993. The photos themselves underwent several changes. Most importantly,

⁴ The city of Bombay, officially known as Mumbai since 1996, is located in the province of Maharashtra, whose official language is Marathi.

photos of heroines became increasingly focussed on the woman's body, while those in 1990 seemed to focus on clothing and the star persona rather than the heroine's strategically shot body. Cover shots of heroines, for instance, gradually progressed from face and head shots to torso and full-body shots throughout the 1990s. The lighting and poses in the photos grew less uniform throughout the magazine between 1990 and 1999.

In addition, the poses, clothing and physiques of the heroines changed considerably across the 1990s. The early 1990s seems replete with photos of heroines staring blankly into the camera lens while posing, holding up/closed clothing covering them, or while leaning on a given hero. Despite this, the apparent lack of facial expression while confronting the lens could be attributed to the inexperience, and perhaps ingénue status, of the newcomers. The wide-eyed, blank expression could also be part of a convention in film magazine photography, but due to lack of data, I cannot speculate further. Nonetheless, by 1995 the facial expressions of heroines in their photos have changed, corresponding to a pin-up iconography that indicates a consciousness or self-awareness in the heroine of the sexuality she exudes. With extreme frequency, photos show heroines with half-closed or relaxed eyes and a slightly open mouth. Richard Dyer notes this expression in the images of Marilyn Monroe, described by Time magazine as "moist, half-closed eyes and moist, half-opened mouth" (in 1986:57). Dyer argues that, in addition to the vaginal symbolism indicated by the wetness or moistness of eyes and mouth, Monroe's expression conveys the repeated imagery of the soft formlessness of female sexuality (1987:58). Although I don't think that a similar argument is applicable to the heroines in *Filmfare*, the pin-up facial iconography of the sex symbol does resurface at a time when the status of the heroine, her sexuality and her respectability are being significantly renegotiated.

Heroine Meenakshi Sheshadri indicates this renegotiation in a quote from the first issue of 1990: "The directors are no longer certain what the Indian woman really is. So the heroine has become the commercial break in films" (in *Filmfare* Jan 1990: n.p.). Rather than marking female sexuality as formless, Sheshadri's statement suggests a transformation of the Hindi film heroine's iconography, and a renegotiation of the representation of female sexuality.

In 1990, *Filmfare* consisted primarily of snippets of gossip coupled with several review articles, but few interviews with heroines, most of which were about three pages

long, on average. Changes to the font, layout and length of the magazine led to interviews with heroines that, by 1999, were three to four times longer than those in 1990, although they had only doubled in average page length. The interviews in the issues of 1999 were so numerous that many were not listed in the table of contents. This is significant considering that the November 1990 special retrospective issue on stars and superstars in the Hindi cinema since the 1920s focussed exclusively on male stars, excluding heroines entirely.

Following a trajectory comparable to trends of consumerism amongst India's 'new middle classes' as described by Rachel Dwyer (2000), the advertisements in *Filmfare* throughout the 1990s changed in terms of the purchasing power and consumer 'attitude' they invoked. For example, ads in the issues of the early 1990s clearly catered to a female readership, referring to sanitary napkins, birth control, and family products framed as 'a wife's responsibility'. Issues from the middle of the 1990s were replete with upmarket luxury and foreign-made items, such as Benetton clothing and ads for perfume, as well as mid-range items, such as scooters and appliances, aimed at a male as well as female audience. The issues of 1995 are a case in point. Several issues featured multiple, often multi-page, ads for different brands of condoms, ads for sexual counselling, and ads for an 'Ayurvedic massage cream' assuring virility for men, all of which could potentially be aimed at a male or female audience. By the end of the 1990s, the combination of upmarket and middle-class items persisted, but the luxury products and/or those modelling for them were most often visibly South Asian in origin. Advertisements continued to address a multi-faceted readership, appearing ambiguous with regard to the gender and/or demographic of the ad's intended target audience, reinforcing the sense of the film magazine as addressing a family readership.

During the course of the 1990s, the media invasion or disregard of star privacy is an issue that recurs in most interviews and articles, regardless of whether these concern heroes, heroines or other industry celebrities. Many stars demand that their private lives be respected, and in interviews, often accuse the media of 'yellow journalism' featuring scandalous or sensationally distorted news. Several stars insist that the unscrupulous media intentionally misrepresent them, and occasionally describe their relationship with journalists as friendships that have been betrayed. Film stars nonetheless recognize that their complicity with publicity structures form an integral part of the construction of their star texts. Rachel

Dwyer provides an example of the antagonism, and yet complicity, of Hindi film stars with the print media:

A serious dispute with the Cineartists Association in 1992 led to their boycott of six magazines (*Stardust*, *Cinéblitz*, *Filmcity*, *Movie*, *Showtime*, *Star'n Style*). This has since been patched up by the stars, who felt they needed the publicity. (2000:177)

The interviews with heroines of the 1990s revealed that stars were increasingly defensive about speaking of their families or other personal issues. As a result, the bulk of *Filmfare* interviews focus on industry gossip, relations with co-workers, directors, etc.

An important element regards the career strategy of the stars; how they navigate and negotiate the supposedly shady and complex networks of the commercial film industry. While these aspects of the interviews were of less interest to me, I do consider the valuation of heroines as shrewd career women in the analysis that follows. My analysis of the publicity-oriented print media examined recognizes the reciprocal and mutually complicit role of stars and journalists: of stars in the construction of their own star texts as well as their contribution to networks of intertextuality, and of the journalists as simultaneous audiences and producers of commentary contributing to star texts and industry gossip.

Because this study focuses on the Hindi film heroine in terms of her sexuality and sexual morality, the analysis of the *Filmfare* interviews will be examined insofar as they resonate with the standards of respectability inherent in the opposition, and conversely collapse, of the ideal heroine and the vamp roles. I argue that both film narratives and *Filmfare* interviews interpellate the heroine as primarily defined through her (necessarily hetero)sexual respectability. As such, I maintain that a renegotiation of the Hindi film heroine's status should be examined in relation to the elements said to define that status; those of respectability and sexual morality.

5. Non-stop dancing: *heroīne* issues

The hero may be involved in plays of honour, power, despair, moral lapses and guilt, but within the logic of the Bollywood cinema, the heroine's character is perpetually and primarily defined in terms of respectability. The most important aspects of respectability are strongly associated to issues of sexual morality and a controlled, restrained and domestic(ated) feminine sexuality. As a result, a deferential attitude towards elders, the acceptance and awareness of the structures of familial and social obligation, and the trappings of modesty (gestural and otherwise: lowered eyes, movements suggesting shyness, sari-wearing, etc.) as a form of gender performativity (see Butler 1990 and 1993) serve to indicate the integrity of the *lāj* and marriageable status of a given on-screen heroine. Increasingly during the course of the 1990s, the markers of a performed ideal status characterize the stylized modesty of a typical heroine. Compromising subsidiary details that would have previously revoked the label of 'ideal' have apparently become morally inconsequential within the frameworks of both film narratives and publicity structures of the print media.

Because the binary of the ideal heroine and vamp characters were defined and opposed primarily in terms of their sexual morality, the collapsing of the two roles in the figure of the emergent 'dancing heroine' would involve a semiotic manoeuvre relevant to notions of sexual morality that would render the transformation not only possible, but acceptable as transformed. In this case, I gauge acceptability by the filmic spaces in which the new heroine surfaces as forums for 'playing out' her representation, and as productions of an industry that recognizes the potential resonance/market for such a figure. In addition, in examining only the most popular Hindi films of the 1990s, I recognize box-office reception, as defined in economic terms, as a form of approval or acceptance of a film narrative by viewing audiences.

In articulating a common notion that viewers find pleasure in material that corresponds to their own interests and concerns, Shoma A. Chatterji also describes the potential influence that economic success affords a film:

The more popular the film is among the masses, the more ingrained the conditioning. Because the popularity of a film does not just mean that more people are watching it, but also that many of them are going to see the same film again and again. (1998: 7)

For example, the artist M.F.Husain claimed to have seen the 1994 *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* 38 times (Shahani 1995 in *Filmfare*: 34). The film, “entirely plotted around the family life events of engagement, marriage, childbirth and death” (Dwyer 2000: 140), was at the time of its release the longest-running (over 52 weeks) and most successful film since the inception of cinema in India (Chatterji 1998: 7). The artist Husain saw in the film’s heroine, Madhuri Dixit, the incarnation of the Indian woman: “I cannot emphasize sufficiently that for me Madhuri means Indian femininity” (in Shahani 1995 in *Filmfare*: 34). The practice of repeated viewing and the artist’s impressions with regard to the film’s heroine are indicative of the semiotic significance that the popular Hindi film is able to instil as well as the extent to which the heroine can be figured as a nationally relevant sign of femininity.

The association of idealized controlled female sexuality to domesticity or to a protective network inform many of the issues discussed in *Filmfare*. However, several issues constitute a contentious ‘yank’ into respectability of elements that, in the media world of the Hindi film industry, would previously have been considered marginal to the acceptability or reputation of a given heroine. The issues most consistently addressed by the journalists and heroines in their media interviews may not seem obviously linked to notions of sexual morality until the extent to which domesticity defines the *lāj* (honour/chastity) of idealized (controlled) femininity is considered. Conversely, middle-class respectability with regards to ideal femininity is compromised/threatened both by unaccompanied public display (not necessarily in performance) and monetary remuneration leading to financial independence. These observations, it must be noted, take place in a semiotic realm of meaning where they exist as signifying notions, tendencies and connotations, neither fully separate from nor easily conflated with everyday existence. Director Shyam Benegal comments:

We [the commercial film industry and the viewing audience complicit in perpetuating an on-screen logic of Bollywood] have decided that in the urban situation, women are less traditional, more likely to behave as they like, more aware of their rights and that in a rural setting [as reflected in Hindi film narrative], they are less likely to change their attitudes and so on. But in reality is this true? Certainly not! (in Prabhu 2001: 51)

As representations, the images of femininity and sexual respectability mediated by film heroines imply that they are representative in that they purport to speak ‘on behalf of’ as well as in that they re-present, or are presented over and over again in cultural forms (Dyer 2002 [1993]: 1). The case of the Hindi film heroines of the 1990s also supports Richard Dyer’s

observation that the tension encompassed by representation exists between the referentiality to larger terms of limitation and possibility and the ability to affect those terms in 'reality', serving as a reminder that "... there is no such thing as unmediated access to reality" (2002 [1993]: 3).

a. The heroine as (potential) wife: all in the family

The conflicts and denouements of almost all the blockbusters of the 1990s revolve around conjugal relations with regard to arranged marriage and joint family relations. In the most idealized of situations, the plot is resolved almost entirely by the social sanction afforded by enlightened elders or a selfless third party, reconciling the transgressive aspects of the narrative with the social obligation and cosmic balance associated with *dharma* and the happy ending. However, the conflicts constituting the Hindi film narrative in the blockbusters of the 1990s are often generated within a family, or between two families who are eventually linked through the marriage of their children. Conversely, several films eliminate the complications that joint family relations and obligations bring to the narrative by erasing them from certain sequences, and occasionally, from certain films entirely (e.g. Banker 1999 in *Filmfare*: 301).

The joint family system, whether presented as a desirable ideal or as a crumbling, redundant institution, is nonetheless an important referent for the iconography of the popular Hindi cinema. Patricia Uberoi, in examining the representation of the joint family system as an ideal and as an object of desire, notes:

For the last century and a half, if not longer, public opinion in India has been obsessed with the spectre of the of the imminent break-up of the Indian joint family system through processes of urbanization, industrialization, westernization, individualization, and the liberation of women. Many professional sociologists of the family are sceptical on this score (e.g. Shah 1974; 1996; Vatuk 1972), but even the most sceptical of them concede that the joint family is, if not a *fact* of traditional Indian society, at least a deeply held traditional *value* that continues to provide the underlying principles of household-building strategies in South Asia, though differently for different regions, castes, and communities. (2001: 327, emphasis in original)

As such, the joint family system fits into the iconography of the commercial Hindi film as an element simultaneously evoking anxieties and desires, nostalgia and pleasure, as well as notions of tradition, cultural identity, and consequently, of the nation. Uberoi goes on to describe the Indian joint family as an icon of the national society, and "and as a form of

'imagined community' (to rather stretch the meaning of Anderson's felicitous concept)"¹ (2001: 312). In examining the dynamics surrounding the Hindi film heroine in terms of her respectability and sexual morality, an analysis of her place in the iconic on-screen family is imperative. The representation of joint family relations allow an on-screen elaboration of the themes of conjugal and kinship loyalties, affinal relations, marriage as part of the life trajectory (especially of women), domesticity and controlled sexuality, as well as *lāj*.

Many film plotlines revolve around joint family relations, or in cases where the heroine's marriage or impending marriage is of primary narrative concern, the plotline often involves the relationship between a new bride and her new in-laws, or between her natal family and her in-laws. The 1993 hit film *Damini* ('Lightning' dir. Rajkumar Santoshi) illustrates the uses of the joint family as a plot device, as well as a backdrop for other plot devices. Simultaneously, the narrative focus in the popular Hindi cinema on the primacy of the conjugal relation of hero and heroine allows the joint family to, in some instances, be perceived as a threat, or to be represented as reflecting the anxieties and desires of the hero-heroine couple regarded as central. Although the plotline of *Damini* is primarily constituted by a young bride's struggle to bring her friend/servant's rapist, who is also her younger brother-in-law (*devar*), to justice, the narrative compounds issues of class, gender and institutional legitimacy with a squarely placed opposition between conjugal relations and the joint family, specifically between a bride and her in-laws.

Damini (Meenakshi Sheshadri) is a middle-class girl, honest and straightforward, who lives in a small home with her parents. Her husband Shekhar (Rishi Kapoor) fell in love with, followed and proposed to her after seeing her dance at a benefit concert. They are married, and *Damini* moves into the rich, upper middle-class household of her in-laws. They treat her badly; no different than they would a servant, although relations with her husband are extremely good. *Damini* befriends the servant Urmi, who is close to her own social class, and the only woman in the household that is of comparable age. During the festivities of Holi, both *Damini* and her husband witness the rape of Urmi by Shekhar's brother and his friends. A domestic battle ensues as the family, including her husband, compel *Damini* not to

¹ The reference is to: Anderson, Benedict. 1983 *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

speak to the police for the sake of the family's reputation and the *devar*'s career and honour, which are described as intertwined.

After visiting Urmi in the hospital, and seeing how she suffers from internal bleeding, Damini decides to speak out. She testifies against her brother-in law in court, but is committed to a mental institution after the family's lawyer establishes that she is mentally unstable and has hallucinations. Damini escapes from the institution and happens to meet a lawyer who ceased practicing after he failed to get justice for his own wife, now deceased. The lawyer agrees to represent Damini. Despite multiple obstacles and Damini's ultimate desperation, including Urmi's sudden death that is framed as a suicide by a police, they win the case when Damini's husband Shekhar decides to testify against his own brother. The film ends with the image of conjugal bliss between husband and wife, and love triumphing over the evils of the joint family and the immoral rich.

The plotline of *Damini* is illustrative of conflicting loyalties to the state, to the victim as a fellow woman, and most importantly, within and involving the joint family. The character Damini is cinematically interpellated as the goddess Durga, who is independent, strong and potentially violent when provoked. Although the issues surrounding the protagonist are those of class and affinal relations, the main narrative abounds with references to sexuality, transgression, and most importantly, middle-class values and sensibilities with regard to these. As such, *Damini* illustrates the legitimization of middle-class notions of respectability through the ultimately favourable (notably bribe-free) sanction of state authority in the form of the judiciary.

Due to the association of *lāj* with domesticity and familial protection, family-based plotlines are of special significance for the heroine's role. As an unmarried woman who, through the course of the plotline, will most likely be wed or will at least meet her prospective husband, the heroine is on the cusp of leaving her natal family and entering a new joint family. In this family, her status may be inferior and she may be exploited, or she might be treated as an auspicious bride who is adored and respected by her in-laws.

In the 1992 film *Beta* ('Son' dir. Indra Kumar), Raju (Anil Kapoor) is devoted to his mother. She, however, has been embezzling funds from the family business. She has isolated Raju's father in a room, proclaiming him mentally unstable, and has kept her son illiterate in order to facilitate the embezzlement. Extenuating circumstances lead Raju to marry

suddenly, and to bring his new bride home without first seeking his mother's sanction. The bride Saraswati (Madhuri Dixit) is literate, bold and clever. A conflict immediately develops between the mother-in-law (*sās*) and the new daughter-in-law (*bahū*). Saraswati discovers the embezzlement and informs her husband, who confronts his family. The *bahū* Saraswati becomes pregnant and her *sās* tries to poison her. Raju cannot believe his mother would do such a thing, and he drinks the poison. A major joint family conflict ensues, with the *bahū* being pressured into signing over their property to her *sās*' relatives. Raju immediately recovers from his unconscious state when his mother cries out for his help. He saves her, and the film ends with Raju and Saraswati preparing to leave the family. Raju's mother undergoes a transformation. She begs them to stay, and the plot is resolved.

Although *Beta* revolves around the *bahū-sās* relationship, the sudden marriage of hero and heroine is a turning point involving issues of marriage, sexual respectability and the family. Saraswati was already engaged when Raju first met her. He became enamoured of her and followed her to a local fair. There, she was assaulted by her fiancé's bodyguard, but was saved by Raju. They flee together, but cannot return directly to her village because of a heavy rainstorm during the night. They return to her home the next day to find themselves confronted by the entire assembled village. Implicit is the accusation of a woman 'having her honour tainted' by having been alone with him for a night, that is, it is assumed that they had intercourse because they were unsupervised for a night. The stakes are raised when her fiancé insults her and one bystander asks who will marry daughters of a village where a girl spends the night alone with a stranger and returns home. Several men begin to beat Raju.

Saraswati retaliates, illustrating the adamant salvaging of respectability by the dancing heroine. She grabs a sickle and threatens the men beating Raju, drawing blood from one of them. She confronts her fiancé and breaks off the engagement, throwing off her gold bangles, and also confronts her attempted rapist, the fiancé's bodyguard. She then turns to her father, asking him how he could believe such dishonourable things about his dutiful daughter. From the moment of Saraswati's retaliation in wielding the sickle, the crowd is silent. As she marches into a nearby temple, the wind is blowing and the bells outside the temple are ringing (a sign of auspiciousness). She takes the small pot of vermilion powder (*sindūr*) from the foot of the image of a goddess (Durga?) and marches back to the middle of the assembly, where Raju stands. In an adamant act of salvaging her respectability, as well

as that of her family and village, Saraswati holds the pot of *sindūr* up to Raju and asks: “Will you love me?” (*‘Mujhe pyār karoge?’* in *Beta*)². Raju puts the vermilion in the parting of her hair, which is understood as his marrying her. Saraswati’s father hugs them both, accepting the couple and resolving the turning point.

Throughout *Beta*, the heroine’s agency is emphasized. However, the scene described above indicates the parameters of sexual respectability that this agency is guided into³. In addition, the *bahū-sās* conflict is contingent upon the heroine’s devotion to her husband, as well as her (largely) gestural enacting of the image of the ideal wife and demure/auspicious bride. As such, the heroine’s respectability is bound to her domesticity, either with her natal family or with her in-laws.

The heroine’s treatment in her husband’s household depends on several factors in the plot. However, I have noticed that in the narratives where the new daughter-in-law or *bahū* is most lovingly accepted into her new joint family, certain features mark that family. Firstly, the family is lacking either a mother figure – a virtual tragedy in the Hindi film – or a daughter figure that would curb the mother-in-law or *sās*’ loneliness. In addition, the expectations of the in-laws and the *bahū* must be comparable: the heroine must accept playing either the pseudo-mother or dutiful daughter. The common expectations revolve around a notion of a devoted and selfless *bahū*, who is associated with ‘tradition’, ‘Indian culture’, ‘family values’ and the image of Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity as reflected in the well-kempt, auspicious wife. The markers of this ideal *bahū* are in her appearance (sari-wearing, etc.), her respect of established (patriarchal) family power structures, her piety (performance of *pūjā* or ritual prayer), and her modesty (*lāj*).

In one of the most important blockbusters of the 1990s, *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* (‘What [Relation] Am I To You!’ 1994, dir. Sooraj Barjatya = *HAHK*), both female protagonists play the role of ideal wives. When two old friends get their older children married, Nisha (Madhuri Dixit), the younger sister of the bride, and Prem (Salman Khan), the younger brother of the groom, fall in love. Pooja (Renuka Shahane), the new *bahū*, plays the ideal wife as well as a properly mannered mother figure to the household of her widower

² This statement is translated in subtitles as “Will you marry me?” (*Beta*). Translations are taken or adapted from video subtitles, if any.

³ The eroticized aspect of *Beta*’s heroine is apparent in the song and dance sequences, all of which are far removed from the domestic space, and one of which still enjoyed notoriety in 1998, known only as the sensual ‘*dhak dhak* number’.

father-in-law. She wears a sari, performs *pūjā*, cooks well, and is affectionate to her *devar* as well as to the household's servants, with whom the family shares relations of friendship⁴. Pooja also becomes pregnant soon after the wedding, adding motherhood to her auspicious traits. Soon after giving birth, however, Pooja dies in an accident, immediately after discovering and sanctioning the match between Prem and Nisha, but before she can inform any other family members of their relationship.

Nisha seems more outgoing than her *dīdī* (older sister). However, when it comes to showing her feelings for Prem, she makes recourse to conventional models of the on-screen wife. Patricia Uberoi describes the transformation:

From a carefree, mischievous, chocolate-licking lass on roller skates, Nisha becomes increasingly demure, soon expressing her growing affection for Prem in rather 'wifely' ways: waiting up for him when he is working late; cooking for him and serving him at the table (including paring his apple for him); preparing his favourite *halva* [a dessert], and sharing with him the baby-sitting of their infant nephew. Simultaneously, she outgrows her adolescent boldness and becomes so bashfully tongue-tied that she finds herself, at the critical moment, unable to confess her love for Prem and to reject the proposal of marriage to Rajesh [i.e. Prem's brother and Pooja's widower] (even when she is given a good opening by Rajesh himself). ... In other words, the blossoming of romantic love and maturing sexuality is not scripted as increasing license, but as increasing inhibition – the end of playfulness and an induction into the discipline of conjugality, within the larger discipline of joint-family living. (Uberoi 2001: 316)

Uberoi also notes the description of the two heroines of *HAHK* in a letter to the editor published in *Filmfare*. The letter makes fun of the plot device transforming desire into *dharma*, noting that "[...] the women are true to their traditional role models" as Hindu wives (Sabat 1995: 161).

HAHK is an extremely stylized film, with idealized family relations, a simplistic plotline, and only very minimal narrative conflict to resolve. However, Patricia Uberoi's study of the film's reception asserts that *viewers saw HAHK* as a mimetic, true-to life projection of the realities of Indian family life (2001: 335). Simultaneously, she notes the acknowledgement of *HAHK* as an image reflecting audience desires:

Despite the supposed authenticity of detail, on which many viewers commented, *HAHK* [*sic*] is not actually a work of cinematic realism... As Madhuri Dixit [heroine/Nisha in *HAHK*] conceded while accepting the *Filmfare* Award for Best Actress of 1994: *HAHK* presents 'a perfect utopia' – about 'simple values and guileless people'. In other words, the film is not about the family as it *is*, but the family as people would like it to be: 'I would want my

⁴ Uberoi notes that the fictitious kinship that includes the servants into the joint family "almost succeeds in overriding class differentiation" (2001: 320), and Shohini Ghosh refers to the narrative relations in *HAHK* as "carnavalesque egalitarianism" (in Uberoi 2001: 320).

daughter-in-law to be as nice and sweet and domesticated' as Madhuri [as Nisha] and Renuka [as Pooja], a middle-aged businessman was reported to have remarked (Mishra 1995) – suggesting, perhaps, that not all daughters-in-law match these exacting standards. Indeed, several viewers self-consciously recognized and took pleasure in the fact that this film portrayed an *ideal* of family life. (Uberoi 2001: 311, emphasis in original)

Uberoi refers to an ideal of controlled sexuality and the integration of *dharma* and desire as part of the middle-class sexual respectability attributed to Pooja/Renuka and Nisha/Madhuri. The life trajectory of marriage and motherhood, aspired to and achieved by each character (in the sense that Nisha becomes the 'mother' of her sister's child), contribute to the notion of their respectability. Conversely, however, the covert romantic relationship between the hero and heroine do not adversely affect the respectability of the heroine, at least, not within the logic of the film's narrative. In addition, the desires expressed by Nisha/Madhuri, the suggestive qualities (innocently portrayed) shown through her clothing, her dances and her interaction with the hero seem to contribute to her respectability or, at least, the desirability of Nisha/Madhuri's brand of uncontested respectability. Significantly, only one of the on-screen sisters/heroinas performs the desirable respectability of the dancing heroine: Pooja/Renuka, as the ideal *bahū* and pseudo-mother figure, neither dances nor enacts overt desirability except for her dutiful piety and virtuousness.

Although the descriptions of Pooja/Renuka and Nisha/Madhuri in *HAHK* may seem to correspond to the image of the ideal heroine of the heroine-vamp binary (while completely excluding the function of the vamp character), the heroine's image has been transformed. The elements marking the heroine as a potential Lakshmi, and thus a potential wife, are exactly the features that render the heroine desirable. In so doing, these features permit the forwardness and boldness of the heroine, either in the form of insisting on certain principles or defending the interests of her husband and family, or in the form of an overtly expressed sensuality that is compensated by the markers of a dutifully restrained sexual morality elsewhere in the narrative. By marking the overt expression of female sexuality as 'the marrying kind', the 'danger' latent in that uncontrolled expression is neutralized in favour of the allusion to an exciting conjugality, rendering the ideal wife sexually desirable as well as harmoniously reconcilable with the *dharma* and destiny that her role entails.

The 1998 blockbuster *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* ('Something is Happening [in My Heart]' dir. Karan Johar = *KKHH*), one of the most successful films in the history of the

Hindi cinema, reflects the hybrid desirability of the dancing heroine in the cases of both its heroines. Roughly, the hero Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan) falls in love with a new girl at his college, Tina (Rani Mukherjee), instead of with his best friend Anjali (Kajol). Both heroines are initially portrayed as modern and stylish, while later on in the film's plotline, their characters are completed or 'rounded' by allusions to their specifically Indian femininity, and thus their enhanced desirability.

Tina is introduced as the Oxford-educated daughter of the college's principal. Anjali is portrayed as a tomboy who plays sports and wears designer workout clothing, but no make-up. Tina first appears on-screen wearing a miniskirt in a sequence where male students ogle her. Included is a shot of her rear end ascending steps, allowing the audience to ogle as well. Rather than either self-conscious or inviting, Tina expresses an aloof air that seems contrived, appearing both unwaveringly confident and detached from the scene around her. The entrance is punctuated by scenes of Rahul, describing his ideal woman: "When she walks, the world looks on, and when she stops, time stops" (*'Jo wo chale, to sab dikhte jāē, aur jab wo ruke, to waqt hojāe'* KKHH). Soon after Tina's initial appearance as a figure of sexual desirability, an episode between the hero and heroine serves to challenge her 'Indianness' while completing her character as an ideal of desirable and respectable Indian femininity, marking her as a potential wife.

Rahul and his 'posse' stop Tina, demanding that she sing a song in Hindi as a form of college initiation rite. The ensuing dialogue between Anjali and Rahul speculates whether an Oxford-educated girl would speak Hindi well enough to sing, invoking language (in particular, Hindi) as an important element of Indian identity. In addition, the debate tacitly refers to the Bollywood iconography that has often associated 'vampish' sexual desirability and 'modern' clothing with the West, thus suggesting a necessary loss of Indian identity implicit in overtly expressed sexuality. Tina cuts off the debate by singing the Divine Hymn (*Jai Jagadīśa Hare*), a basic Sanskrit hymn or *bhajan* that serves to ward off danger (John Leavitt, personal communication), and whose value has been established in a previous scene. Both Rahul and Anjali's faces display shock, then extreme satisfaction. This turning point amalgamates the sexually desirable heroine with the virtuous ideal that implies both dutiful Hindu piety and Indianness. The adamant aspect of the dancing heroine's transformation is emphasized as Tina boldly walks up to Rahul, the sound of her high heels resonating in the

silence following her singing: “Living in London and studying and growing up there has not made me forget my roots, and don’t you forget that” (*‘Lanḍan mẽ rahne se, wāhā paṛhne likhne se, māt apne sanskār nāhī bhūlī. Aur tum ye mat bhūlnā’* KKHH).

On several occasions, scenes showing Tina’s sexual desirability are followed by episodes that emphasize her Indianness and her virtue, as conflated with images of Hindu piety. In the introduction to the song *Koi Mil Gaya* (‘I’ve Met/Found Someone’), Tina ascends the steps of a catwalk, emerging from a crowd, wearing a silvery sleeveless minidress with a scarf or *dupaṭṭā*, playing an electric guitar. She is framed as a vision of sexual desirability, in windblown slow motion, with male onlookers in the crowd expressing approving shock. The only sounds accompanying the spectacle are the notes of the guitar solo, giving an eerie muted feeling to the dearth of background activity in the crowd from which Tina emerges. The song itself is more convivial than overtly sexualized or romantic, although it also serves as a plot device to establish the love triangle between Rahul, Tina and Anjali.

Soon after the song, Rahul meets Tina at a local temple where both have gone to perform *pūjā*. In opposition to her appearance at the college campus, Tina is wearing a *śalwār kamīz* and much less make-up. Once again, Tina’s image is framed as amalgamating the sexually desirous heroine with the dutiful, pious ideal of Indian femininity. The episode also superimposes the images of the necessarily uncontrolled sexuality that overtly eroticized spectacles imply with the controlled, restrained images of the pious Hindu woman. In indicating her capacity to fulfil the role of the Hindu wife, through her awareness of Indian culture or *sanskār* and her performance of *pūjā*, Tina is figured as a potential Lakshmi. Tina appears as a potential wife whose life trajectory, indicated by the narrative devices described above, ultimately ends in marriage to the hero.

Eight years after Tina’s death in childbirth, Rahul recalls Anjali as a tomboy who played basketball. In a sequence reminiscent of Tina’s on-screen entrance, Rahul’s dialogue is punctuated with scenes of Anjali (or rather, fragmented shots of Anjali) doing everything that she had avoided in college: applying eye makeup, putting on a *ṭīkā*, wearing gold bangles. The sequence suggests that Anjali’s fragments are emblematic of Indian femininity, and that Anjali has become an Indian woman, at long last. It turns out that Anjali is preparing for her own engagement, and the idea that Indian femininity climaxes at the

moment of marriage rites is strongly conveyed through the filmic narrative. Later on in the film, Anjali is seen to wear her hair long and to wear saris. In an important sequence establishing the boundaries that Indian femininity implies, Anjali loses a basketball rematch to Rahul because her sari (read: the role of the Indian woman) prevents her from playing properly: it keeps coming undone during the game. Despite Anjali's frustration, it is clear that she has chosen to assume the role of an Indian woman, and ultimately, that of a Lakshmi. The film's narrative also strongly suggests, in banal terms, that it is better to accept this form of respectable, bounded and culturally legitimized image of femininity than to try to play basketball (i.e. on male turf).

Regardless of the demands of a particular role, the assumption that the trajectory of a film's plotline will lead to the marriage or union of the heroine with the hero is a safe bet. The analysis of star texts in the magazine *Filmfare* yields comparable conclusions. The star images, however, deal with iconography surrounding the notions of domesticity and independence, as they are associated with controlled sexuality in the form of marriage or the 'protection' of *lāj* as afforded by the natal family, and with uncontrolled sexuality in the form of public performance or a career that may cancel out the possibility of marriage. A heroine's career conventionally depends on her unmarried status, and rumours of a secret marriage, engagement or romance are purported to endanger a heroine's professional prospects⁵.

Heroines consistently refute suggestions that they are secretly/are planning to/ will soon be married by insisting that they are 'career-minded'. Rachel Dwyer clarifies:

Marriage and a career in cinema are seen as irreconcilable for women. Women are expected to retire from the industry after marriage, partly because fans will not accept a married woman in romantic roles and also because her place is in the home. The only possibility is of a return to play mothers and character roles. (2000: 194)

Heroine Amrita Singh describes her situation, as newly married to an upcoming hero at the time of the interview:

[Journalist:] Your career seems to be at a standstill. Have the offers stopped coming after marriage?

[Amrita Singh:] My marriage has a lot to do with it. Unfortunately in the business I'm in, it's believed that when an actress is married she won't concentrate on her work. Then producers are

⁵ It must be noted that rumours of illicit or extramarital affairs purportedly bolster the image of male counterparts, reinforcing the sense of their virility. In addition, it is acceptable for heroes to continue their careers regardless of their marital status. Although heroes are increasingly being defined as objects of desire, being married does not seem to have had an effect on the perception of their desirability.

paranoid about their heroines getting pregnant. But in my case marriage is incidental. I'd anyway outlived my time as a heroine. Now it's character roles for me. (Raja 1993 in *Filmfare*: 44)

The rule of retirement after marriage is, however, unspoken. Several heroines have continued their careers after marriage, most notably Dimple Kapadia who returned to the industry after an extended absence. After getting married (as well as divorced) and raising two daughters, Kapadia came out of 'retirement' in the 1980s, definitively retreating into the 'art cinema' as her own daughter, Twinkle Khanna, was preparing to be launched in commercial films. The convention nonetheless prevails, at least in interviews with heroines, that marriage and one's career must be mutually exclusive until an actress is successful enough to be able to afford to flout the norm.

In addition, despite the perpetual refutation of intentions to marry any time in the near future, that Hindi film heroines constitute potential wives that will eventually marry is considered a given in the industry media. The marriage of a heroine completes the allegory of her life's filmic trajectory, where the dancing heroine is transformed into the ideal domesticated (sexually controlled) wife immediately after her wedding, when she leaves her natal home to (traditionally) live with her husband's family. Although a few heroines speak of marriage and 'settling down' in terms of possibility rather than as an eventual certainty, many speak of married life with anticipation and enthusiasm, referring to the careers that exclude the possibility of marriage as mere intervals in the trajectory of a woman as a potential wife and mother. As such, the heroines do not believe that their current employment activity will definitively compromise their 'real-life' marriageability and respectability.

In an interview very early in her career, Shilpa Shetty expresses both the irreconcilable aspects of marriage and a heroine's career, as well as the assumed inevitability of marriage in her life trajectory:

[Shilpa Shetty:] A relationship demands commitment. And I don't have time for all that.

I have a goal to achieve – success. I want to be remembered as a good actress. I want to do some great work. I plan to be around for the next eight years. Once I achieve my dreams I'll quit.

[Journalist:] Why?

[Shilpa Shetty:] There's a time and place for everything. I'm not here forever. That's for sure. The industry isn't the be-all and end-all of my life. After I quit, I want to lead a happy married life. (Choudhary 1995 in *Filmfare*: 58)

Neelam also refers to marriage in terms of certainty rather than possibility in the life trajectory of a respectable heroine:

[Journalist:] One hears you've given yourself a 2-3 years [*sic*] deadline in which to complete all your assignments after which you'll quit the industry and get married.

[Neelam:] Well, I've decided to take things easy. Yes, I do intend to get married after a couple of years though its [*sic*] not as if I've found the man I'd like to marry. Yes, after marriage I will definitely quit the industry. I know people say they [illegible] quit and return, I won't. (Mukherjee, R. 1991 in *Filmfare*: 29)

Bhagyashree's failed attempt to make a comeback⁶ after marriage doing films only with her husband reflects the irreconcilability of the dutiful, devoted wife and the dedicated career woman as perceived by the industry:

[Journalist:] You have been treating your career like a pastime. Doesn't it show a lack of commitment?

[Bhagyashree:] It is a pastime for me. My first priority is my home – my child, my husband. Everything else is secondary. But if I've taken on a commitment, I honour it. I've never cancelled a shooting because of any problems at home. I've not given my producers cause for complaint. (Raja 1992 in *Filmfare*: 33)

Commenting on Bhagyashree, director K.C. Bokadia articulates the doubtfulness with which commercial Hindi filmmakers regard combining marriage and a heroine's career:

At present acting is like a part-time job for Bhagyashree. Her family seems to be more important to her. People in the industry, therefore, feel she is not very professional. She also places several conditions before signing a film. This may not be good for her career, but that's how she wants it. (in Raja 1992 in *Filmfare*: 33)

Although heroines may acknowledge the importance of their unmarried status to their present careers, or express concern about some of the problems associated with marital relations (the 'wifely' role, relations with in-laws, domestic abuse, etc.), the vast majority of heroines express a desire to marry and have children, to 'settle down'. On occasion, this desire is consistently articulated and assimilated into the star's image, but at times the desire to eventually 'settle down' is denied as well as admitted to, sometimes during the course of a single interview. Both Madhuri Dixit and her interviewer express anxieties about the prospect of her marriage. The heroine is concerned about her role in an unfolding conjugal relationship, the journalist seems to be concerned about losing a star:

[Madhuri Dixit, referring to a prospective suitor her parents asked her to meet:] "[...] We vibed well. He was a sweet guy...but alas he wasn't right for me."

⁶ Bhagyashree made her debut opposite Salman Khan in the 1989 blockbuster *Maine Pyaar Kiya* (dir. Sooraj Barjatya).

V... v... vibe well? I'm thunderstruck... yoiks... am I getting possessive of Mads [Madhuri]? Can't bear the idea of my interviewee getting married and disappearing into a domestic haven. So I'm relieved when she says, "I didn't feel anything happening inside me. Guess it's important to feel attracted to a guy... in some way or the other. Maybe if I'd felt butterflies in my stomach, I would have said yes."

[...]

Would she marry a guy who isn't from her community? And hello, I'm not hinting (or am I?)

"Caste, community no bar. I wouldn't mind marrying Amar, Akbar or Anthony⁷. But of course, if it is someone from my community, my parents would be more pleased."

[...] I can't help remarking that Mads seems to be almost scared of marriage.

"I guess in a way, I am scared of marriage. I'd be answerable to my husband 24 hours a day. When you meet a guy casually, he is on his best behaviour. But after marriage, the pretensions dissolve. One of my friends married someone who seemed to be the sweetest guy on earth. But he turned out to be a horrible wife beater."

She tells me more about the cad. She's sounding grim... to shift her back into the happy mode, I joke... is she scared of ending up with a husband who snores? (Mohamed 1998a in *Filmfare*: 31-32)

The interviewer's commentary in the above statement is an insightful example of how journalists crosscut the roles of critic and fan, simultaneously complicit with the film industry while asserting a detachment that allows them to plausibly express the perspective of a viewing audience.

Manisha Koirala associates 'marriage' with 'family values' and acknowledges the eventuality of marriage as postponed, but not replaced, by her career, although the two are kept carefully separate in her description. Her statements illustrate the interplay of desire, sexual morality and respectability in the renegotiation figured by the dancing heroine:

[Manisha Koirala:] I'm conservative within limits.

[Journalist:] What does 'conservative within limits' mean?

[Manisha Koirala:] I have values. I believe in marriage and sacred vows. I would never live in with my boyfriend. I'm not condemning those who do...to each her own.

[...]

[Journalist:] Do you dream about domesticity? A seaside home with kids?

[Manisha Koirala:] I do want to get married and have kids but right now I keep dreaming of a successful career. Contrary to popular opinion, I have more on my mind than that four-letter word called...love. (Qureshi 1994: 54)

In none of the statements above do the heroines exclude the possibility of marriage from their projected life plans. Marriage is referred to more as an inevitable conclusion to an actress's career, with the notion of an overlap between marriage and career as short-term, at best.

⁷ The reference is to the film *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* (1977, dir. Manmohan Desai) in which three brothers are separated from their (Hindu) mother as children, and are brought up as Hindu (Amar), Muslim (Akbar) and Christian (Anthony).

The role of a dutiful wife, as imagined by as yet unmarried women such as, and apparently as envisioned through the lens of an on-screen logic including romantic love and unstinting wifely devotion, seems to be a source of anxiety for several heroines (see Madhuri Dixit's statement above). However, the transformation undergone by the narrative heroine as she makes the transition from single woman/daughter to wife, adopting a demure persona (sometimes only temporarily), is more complex among 'real-life' stars. Madhoo's example is punctuated by the disbelief of her friends and entourage, undermining the self-evidence of the on-screen transition:

What my friends don't understand is that I may seem outgoing on the surface. But deep inside me there's a very homely woman who's determined to become a typical housewife. I was leading a [illegible] and frivolous life till now. (in Unattributed 1998b in *Filmfare*: 109)

The disbelief of Madhoo's friends indicates the difficulty that the dancing heroine's amalgamation of ideal heroine and vamp characteristics poses in 'real life'. The transformation is double-sided. The narrative heroine, conventionally considered 'ideal' or 'traditional' and coded positively with regard to her sexuality, changes her identity by taking on vampish characteristics. The heroine as a star persona and career woman, conventionally considered uncontrolled or dangerous and coded negatively in terms of sexuality and sexual morality, takes on aspects of 'ideal' restraint in salvaging the respectability of her star image.

The renegotiation of the borders of sexual morality and respectability associated with the Hindi film heroine is evident in the adamant manner in which the unspoken convention of retirement after marriage is contested. Numerous heroines, who either put the inevitability of their own retirement, or that of their own eventual marriage, into question, refute the opposition of domesticity or marriage versus a career. While several heroines have continued to act after they were married, their careers have been stunted and short-lived in comparison to their success in films before marriage. However, the heroines who have continued to act after marriage in the 1990s have often been long-flourishing stars who married after the peak of their careers. The opposite has yet to be achieved (see Bhagyashree's example above), where a heroine would marry early on in her career and would continue to act successfully as an unmarried woman, ascending to star status as a 'real-life' wife who can be unproblematically accepted as portraying an object of desire.

Meenakshi Sheshadri expresses her desire to 'settle down', but frames her statement in terms of possibility rather than certainty. She refutes the opposition between marriage and

a heroine's career and echoes the on-screen ideal of romantic exclusivity in terms of destiny as 'the right one':

[Journalist:] To come back to where we started, are you thinking of getting married?

[Meenakshi Sheshadri:] Hmm, yes. I'm ready for marriage now. For the last five years, I have felt the need for settling down. *Main sayani ho gayee hoon na?* [I've become wise⁸, no?] But marriage doesn't necessarily mean the end of one's career... neither does the end of one's career mean matrimony. I could continue for another five years. Or I could get married next month.

[Journalist:] To whom?

[Meenakshi Sheshadri:] The man I marry should be able to live with me for the rest of my life. We must be able to tolerate each other. When I find the right guy, I'll let the world know. (Jahagirdar-Saxena 1994b in *Filmfare*: 102)

While Juhi Chawla does not overtly contest the 'marriage vs. career' opposition, neither does she acknowledge the self-evidence of retirement after marriage:

"I'll get married ...," she continues. "Some of you press guys got me married a year ago [i.e. through gossip]. I guess that's to be expected since I'm seeing Jai [Mehta, NRI billionaire]. But right now, I have a lot of work at home. My aunts are helping me out..."

According to the trade buzz, Juhi has asked all her producers to complete her work quickly so she can quit.

Juhi denies this, though: "I do have some decent films lined up. But there's no pressure on me to quit the day I get married. Neither have I said that I will quit. Let's see what happens. I'm still undecided about what to do. I guess I'll leave it all to... (*looking skywards*)... somebody up there!" (C. 1996 in *Filmfare*: 68, emphasis in original)

From the above statement, the title of the interview was construed: 'Juhi Chawla: Why should I give up acting after marriage?' The title, decidedly more forceful than Chawla's own statements, suggests that a renegotiation supposed irreconcilability of marriage with a heroine's career addresses the projected anxieties and desires of journalists, and perhaps, of an addressed readership.

Madhuri Dixit refutes allusions to gossip about her marital status and insists on her personal fulfilment as a single, working woman. She does not, however, exclude the possibility of marriage and motherhood, nor does she cubbyhole her role as a domesticated wife in the following statement:

[Madhuri Dixit, on gossip about her media-made marriages:] Frankly, this marriage talk is becoming a joke.

Ha! The day I really get married no one will take me seriously. Actually, I think no one can accept the fact that a girl can be unmarried, unattached and happy.

[...]

⁸ In this context, I use wise in the colloquial sense of 'to wise up' or 'to get wise', meaning to realize or to come to one's senses.

[Journalist:] Know something? I can't think of you as a regular housewife, getting up at 6 a.m., heating the milk, packing your husband's and children's tiffins.

[Madhuri Dixit:] Wait and watch. I'll do a good job of that too. Maybe when the kids are small, I won't work. But once they start going to school, I'll get back to being a working woman. (Pillai 1996d in *Filmfare*: 47,49).

The status of the Hindi film heroine as a working woman whose career seems to depend on her unmarried status, as well as her willingness to perform/feign intimacy with multiple partners in films, renders her negotiation of marriage and motherhood within a rubric of middle-class sexual respectability necessarily conflict-ridden. The heroine of the 1990s reconciles marriage with her career, which excludes it, by expressing her desire to follow a respectable life trajectory of marriage and motherhood. This desire, however, is projected into an eventual future, while the possibility of marriage is excluded from the career-oriented present. A such, the desire to marry is counterbalanced by the desire to have a career, to be a heroine, to act in films, and by extension, not to marry – at least for an unspecified period of time. Another alternative constitutes contesting the marriage versus career opposition by challenging the unspoken norm of retirement, but this opposition has yet to be maintained indefinitely.

b. Love, love marriages & heterosexual desire

An important aspect of marriages in the commercial Hindi film industry, both on-screen and off it, is that love marriages outnumber arranged marriages to the extent that they are the norm. The valuing of love and romance in film plotlines seems to have leaked into both the life-events and expectations of film stars and their publicity structures. Arranged marriages⁹ as well as familial respect and fidelity constitute part of the image of *dharma* constructed by on-screen narratives of the commercial Hindi cinema as a means of legitimizing sexual desire and desirability. Power structures internal to a family, and the conflicting expectations of various elders, generate much of the on-screen drama. Notably, in

⁹ Arranged marriages are organized by the parents and/or families of the respective spouses, and between individuals who, it is generally thought, did not know each other before the marriage contract was suggested by their families. Jyoti Puri specifies that “‘arranged marriages’ are associated with practices such as girl-viewing, practical considerations of a prospective husband’s occupation, and his family’s status, and deferred marital intimacy, if any”, but Puri also notes that “parents may legitimize mutual attraction between a young woman and man of the same social class by arranging the marriage” (1999: 139). The latter occurrence is reminiscent of the Bollywood logic of plot resolution of the romantic film: The legitimizing of an otherwise transgressive relationship with parental approval.

an example from the late 1980s given below, elders and families neither accept nor acquiesce to changes that the younger protagonists have undergone, thus inciting the hero and heroine to resistance or subversion. As a result, the plotlines of the early 1990s involve a turning point, in which the elders recognize the changes they eventually accept, according to the logic of the Bollywood narrative, in order to transform the narrative's potential transgressivity into neutralized, socially-sanctioned, happy-ending *dharma*.

After 1994, the conflicts become increasingly defined by circumstance, misunderstanding and coincidence. Convoluted situations arise, where the young protagonists choose to follow what they believe is their duty and social obligation, in opposition to their personal desires, only to be rescued by enlightened elders or third parties who facilitate the union of the protagonists. In this way, the lovers/protagonists are brought together, in circumstances usually requiring the family's decision on the choice of spouse, without having to exercise the indecorous faculty of personal agency that necessarily flouts parental authority and social obligation. Not only are open transgressions of parental authority virtually taboo, but villainy and violence are also minimized, softened or absent in several of the blockbusters of the mid- to late 1990s. In several of the most popular films of the 1990s, the sanctioning of or failure to sanction the romantic relationship between the hero and heroine, either by elders or by a third party, constitutes the most important and climactic turning point of the film's narrative.

The 1988 hit *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* ('From Doomsday to Doomsday' dir. Mansoor Khan), starring the newcomers Aamir Khan and Juhi Chawla, contains not only several elements that eventually come to dominate the popular films of the 1990s, but also includes several narrative conventions that are absent from later hit films. The film narrative of *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (= *QSQT*) follows the basic storyline of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: Children of feuding families fall in love and maintain their relationship despite their parents' reprimands. They elope and live in hiding, are tracked down by their feuding fathers, and the hero commits suicide when the heroine is shot with bullets that her father had meant for him.

The heroine is quite forward when addressing the hero early on in the film. She is neither shy nor particularly demure; nonetheless, she appears as a clean-cut heroine¹⁰. In fact, the hero initially appears both taken aback and slightly scandalized at her boldness, as his facial expressions indicate. This trend continues throughout the 1990s, as heroines seem increasingly comfortable and unembarrassed by their own boldness, whether with regard to their heroes or to strangers, friends and passers-by. Elders and family members, however, are treated with deference.

When the hero convinces the heroine (Rashmi) that their only way to achieve togetherness is to elope, he justifies their own agency by claiming that children should not unquestioningly follow the demands and grudges of their parents: “Rashmi, neither your father nor my father have the right to make decisions about your life and mine. We are certainly their offspring/progeny, but not their estate [i.e. that they own]” (*‘Raśmī, tumhāre aur merī zindagī ke bāre mẽ faislā karne ka haq nā tumhāre pitā ko hai nā mere pitā ko. Ham unkī aulād zarūr hāī, unkī jāgīr nāhī QSQT*). Neither this statement nor the plan to elope, transgressing and challenging kinship ties, corresponds to the logic of *dharma* in the family-oriented blockbusters of the 1990s. In later films, commitment to one’s lover is held as symbolically subordinate to the love for the family, that is, until the plot resolution allows the former to triumph by being sanctioned by the family. However, the role of the third party or enlightened family member as facilitating the union of the young protagonists finds an unfulfilled precedent in *QSQT*. The heroine’s paternal grandmother, witness to the initial altercation precipitating the existing feud between the two families, takes the first steps towards resolving the conflict by approaching the hero’s family. Instead of offering reconciliation, however, she offers a warning of her son’s intentions to have the hero killed. The family arrives too late however, and both protagonists end up dead. In future blockbusters, lovers are united rather than destroyed, and families ultimately offer their support for the match, rather than threats and unmoving obstinacy. The message of such films is not that ‘love conquers all’, but instead that only enlightened elders can transform romantic relationships into acceptable ones.

¹⁰ Juhi Chawla complained of this image in the early part of her career, trying on multiple occasions to escape the ‘good girl’ label by performing suggestive song and dance sequences, attempting to add sensuality to her star image, often to no avail: “Desperate to shed her girl-next-door image, Juhi Chawla has done some sizzling scenes in *Lootere* and *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman*. They’ll prove I don’t lack sex appeal, she says” (caption to Mukherjee 1992a in *Filmfare*: 2).

The plot resolutions of *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* ('What [Relation] Am I To You!' 1994, dir. Sooraj Barjatya), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* ('Something is Happening [in My Heart] 1998, dir. Karan Johar) and *Taal* ('Rhythm' 1999, dir. Subhash Ghai) are cases in point. In the first film (=HAKK), one of the longest-running and largest-grossing films in the history of the Hindi cinema, the ultimate union of the two protagonists is facilitated by multiple elements excluding the agency of the hero and heroine themselves. After the hero's wife - who is the heroine's sister - died in an accident, the families agree to have the heroine marry the young widower for the sake of providing a mother to the infant that the deceased had left behind. Both hero and heroine accept this situation as their *farz* or moral duty (in a duet sung over the telephone), renouncing the importance of their own relationship in the process.

At the wedding ceremony, the servant whom the hero calls 'brother' asks an image of Lord Krishna to somehow let the true lovers come together. The bride writes a last farewell note to the hero, giving it to the charismatic dog, Tuffy, to be delivered. In a scene of deliberation interspersed with shots of the image of Krishna's face, with devotional singing in the background, Tuffy decides to deliver the note to the prospective groom instead of the lover. The groom goes directly to the bride's quarters, building suspense, and is followed by the parents of both parties as well as the hero. A series of monologues gently reprimand the hero and heroine for setting aside their love for one another in favour of a marriage set by social obligation. Desire is sanctioned by parental approval, and becomes *dharma*. The hero and heroine are married in a happy ending.

In the second film, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (=KKHH), another of the most successful blockbusters in the history of Bollywood, the plot has a similar resolution. When the hero's wife dies in childbirth, she leaves a letter for her daughter, to be opened on her eighth birthday, in which she asks her daughter to reunite the hero with his college friend, the heroine, after whom the daughter was named. An extensive flashback reveals that when the heroine realized that she loved the hero, while he loved his future wife, she left the college. Eventually the daughter, with the complicity of her paternal grandmother, locates the heroine, and brings the hero and heroine back into contact. Their emotions are still strong, but the heroine has already been engaged to another man. They make no move to impede the

coming marriage, the pretext being that the hero has not actually told the heroine that he loves her¹¹.

The hero comes, with his family, to the marriage ceremony. As the bride descends a staircase towards the marriage pandol and the groom, both hero and heroine are gazing at each other, crying. When she reaches the middle of the staircase, she hesitates. At this moment, the groom realizes that the two are in love, and throws his ceremonial turban to the ground, a scandalous gesture accompanied by an intensified drum sequence in the background. He ascends the staircase, saying: "I'll drag you to the marriage pandol, I told you so, didn't I?" (*Hāth pakar kar manḍap le jaunga. Kahā thā, nā?* KKHH). He grabs the hand of the bride and pulls her to the middle of the floor. At this point the hero stops himself from approaching, and turns away. There is silence until the groom begins his monologue, releasing the heroine (Anjali) to the hero (Rahul):

You know I always wanted to see that love in your eyes that I have in mine. Today I've seen it, but it's not for me. You're crazy Anjali. You've always loved him. Ever since you've known love, understood love, you've loved only him. Rahul is your first love and no one understands first love more than I do. You were going to give this all up for me? Stupid! How can I come between this love that was never mine in the first place?
(KKHH)

(*Tum jāntī ho, māt hameshā tumhārī ānkhō mē wo pyār dekhnā chāhā, jo merī ānkhō mē, aur āj mujhe wo pyār dikhāī dīyā hai, lekin wo mere liye nāhī. Tum pāgal ho Anjali. Tumne sirf usī se pyār kīyā hai. Jabse tumne pyār ko samjāe, pyār ko jānā, tumne sirf usī se pyār kīyā hai. Rāhul hī tumhārā pahlā pyār hai aur pahlā pyār kyā hotā wo mujhse pūch. Aur tum. Tum mere liye sab ghavānāh chāhtī thī? Pāgal. Mai is pyār ke bīc mē kaise ā saktā hū, ye to kabhī merā thā hī nāhī?*) (KKHH)

The heroine tries to say something, but the groom cuts her off, gently telling her to go to the hero (*Jāo. Jāo.* KKHH). The hero and heroine are married, everyone cries at the reunion, and even the rejected groom dances at the wedding.

The plot resolution of KKHH suggests the ease with which the happy ending might have been supplanted by a forced marriage, with which even the protagonists would have been complicit. It indicates the volatility of the happy ending that collapses *dharma* with desire, requiring one character (the groom) overstep the bounds of convention in order to legitimize the transgressivity of the love relationship/marriage. The groom's character also acknowledges in his monologue the importance of mutual emotional involvement in the

¹¹ I.e. The hero has chosen not to allow the verbalization of his love to 'become real', which would thus become a real transgression or a real challenge to the normal, and presumed to be destined, sequence of events.

ideal romantic relationship, suggesting the impossibility of forcing a love bond either together or apart ("How can I come between this love that was never mine in the first place?" *KKHH*). The logic of Bollywood in the films discussed clearly implies that the love marriage transformed by social sanction is an image resonating with desires rather than *dharma*, although the latter is what renders the former intelligible in the context of the commercial film.

Of significance for the heroine, in none of the films examined does the option of not marrying enter the limits of possibility for the outcome of a film's plot. She may marry one man or the other, but never opts out. In each case, an enlightened elder or third party is required to act in order to absolve the protagonists of the transgressive aspect that agency, or the flouting of *dharma*, implies. In the 1999 film *Taal* the situation is much the same. Lovers from different socioeconomic classes (rich/urban and poor/rural) part in defense of their fathers' honour after an altercation in which both parents insulted one another. The heroine's groom realizes, during the procession to the marriage, that the heroine loves the hero. He releases her and tells her to go to her beloved. There is a dog involved and she must run through a crowd in her wedding finery, but the hero and heroine are ultimately united in a happy ending. The plot resolution is presented as precariously as in *HAHK* and *KKHH*, involving minimal, if any, agency on the part of the lovers themselves.

In adopting the values and logic of the *filmī duniyā* as proclaimed through the logic of film narrative, heroines renegotiate the terms of their sexual respectability. This is achieved by acknowledging the relevance of respectability for the heroines' own status, as well as enacting the images of romantic love and sexual desire. The 'acting out' of love and desire may take on the form of illicit affairs or relationships that are intended to lead to marriage. However, much of the treatment of love and desire in interviews remains most apparent at the level of spoken speculation rather than referential to aspects of sexual desire a heroine is willing to admit to in print. As such, heroines construct a reality primarily by stating that it is so. Foucault refers to the role of 'saying' in his repression hypothesis:

We are conscious of defying established power, our tone of voice shows that we know we are being subversive... (in Dyer 1987: 39)

The statements of Hindi film heroines concord with Foucault's assertion in that the heroines are reluctant to refer to concrete occasions or examples of their own desires. Instead, they

use abstract terms, hypothetical situations, or anecdotes that are removed from their own star images. The 'talking about' love and desire must not advocate or describe an uncontrolled sexuality. It can equally consist of a refutation of desire or a dismissal of unrestrained sexuality.

Twinkle Khanna's policy on not discussing personal matters with journalists refers to the enacting, or 'talking about', love and desire that stays general and abstract enough so as not to compromise respectability. An interviewer comments:

Tina's [= Twinkle Khanna's] adamant refusal to talk about her love life is irksome in a way, but it has succeeded in keeping the newshounds at bay. Yet she's willing to natter on the ways of the heart. (Pillai 1997b in *Filmfare*: 72).

On several occasions, journalists and older stars note that although affairs and rumours were commonplace in the film industry in previous decades, never before the 1990s have journalists been so persistent in extracting salacious details from stars for the purposes of the print media. Perhaps this persistence is reflected in the interviewer's deeming of Khanna's privacy policy as somewhat 'irksome', suggesting that her restraint extends to what she allows to be made public.

Karisma Kapoor refutes the label of unrestrained sexuality that media gossip associates with film heroines:

Just because we are in a profession which is in the public eye doesn't mean that everyone is falling in and out of love. I wish everyone would mind their own business!

However, Kapoor frames the purported affairs in terms of love rather than in terms of (uncontrolled) desire. It seems that Kapoor uses the word 'love' in conjunction with the on-screen logic of the Hindi film narrative, where love and sexual desire are conflated. She refutes the perception that undermines the exclusivity and finality of the on-screen romantic relationship that ends with the assumption of marriage, while referring to the compounding of (hetero)sexual desire as indicated by the 'acting out' of intimacy in successive films.

Manisha Koirala addresses many of the issues surrounding relationships, compatibility, parental approval, and their implications for sexual respectability in the following statement:

[Manisha Koirala, on her ex-boyfriend Ranjeev Mulchandani:] My affair with him was over the day I realised he was two-timing me with Aishwarya. I was in such a frazzled state. [...]
[Journalist:] Boy! That was some outburst!
[Manisha Koirala:] No sweetheart, it wasn't. I just can't let people walk all over me and talk sick stuff about me. I'm not a slut.

That greaseball calls a four-month relationship a one-night stand! My parents kept warning me that he wasn't the right sort. (*Laughs*) And I'd argue with them that they disapprove of all my boyfriends. In the final analysis, they are always right... (Pillai 1995c in *Filmfare*: 26)

Koirala reclaims her respectability by responding to gossip and mudslinging, asserting that she 'is not a slut'. Simultaneously, she legitimizes a 'relationship' over the uncontrolled sexuality of a 'one-night stand', while suggesting the understandable and well-founded disapproval that her parents have of her boyfriends. Koirala's comments about her parents' opinion can be read as her acquiescence to their advice, as well as her parents' disapproval of Koirala having boyfriends at all, rather than a disapproval of each boyfriend as an individual.

On the rare occasions when a heroine does speak openly, or naively, about her own relation to issues of sexual desire or sexual activity, however, the print media regards the statement as fodder for scandal. The headline on the cover of the 1994 issue of *Stardust*, "'I'm a virgin and I'm still at the top!' Mamta erupts!" (in Dwyer 2000: 189), refers to the questionable sexual morality associated with Hindi film heroines, but also emphasize the primacy of reclaiming respectability. In addition, the headline and statement, made by a heroine who once posed topless (her hands covered her breasts *à la* Demi Moore) for *Stardust* to great scandal and media/industry brouhaha, are particularly illustrative of the figuring of the dancing heroine, for whom sex appeal and middle-class respectability are equally important for consolidating her transformed sexual identity.

Sonali Bendre insists on the middle-class respectability that extends to her natal family, describing her occupation as a "career option" and being lauded by the journalist interviewer: "(she actually thinks!)" (Nilesh 1995 in *Filmfare*: 91-92). In the interview, Bendre asserts that she is independent, has high standards for her relationships, would never engage in extra-marital affairs, would give up her career for motherhood, and suggests that physical attraction and sexual desire can be controlled.

While the growing awareness among the younger generation today has led to a greater maturity, it is also felt that many stars on the ascendant are living life on the edge. Sonali understands the shifts in values and explains, "My family belongs to the middle class. We're orthodox about so many things. Yet I hate narrow-mindedness. I've been wearing shorts all my life. So even today for a photo-session or a film, I've no hang-ups about wearing them. Also my parents have been liberal enough towards us, we've had to distinguish the good from the bad. For instance, though they never banned smoking or drinking, I've never felt the slightest inclination to light up a cigarette or swig beer. I may sound extremely boring but I've never ever felt the need to have a secret boyfriend." She laughs delightedly at her clean-cut policy. (Nilesh 1995 in *Filmfare*: 94)

It is particularly interesting to note that on the very same page of the above monologue of middle-class respectability, there is a photo of Bendre holding closed a bathrobe over a bare shoulder and bare thigh, apparently compensating visually for the self-professed boring image articulated in the heroine's verbal exchange.

Tabu simultaneously refutes and acknowledges the possibility of a transgressive desire. In so doing, she reinforces a sense of respectability as well as the strength of her familial bonds:

[Tabu, responding to allegations of an affair with a married man:] False. Absolutely false. We're a simple, conservative, middle-class family. Such scandals are far removed from our little world. If I was involved with someone...it wouldn't matter if he was married...I would have confided in *ammi* [transl. Mom]. (Mukherjee, R. 1995: 74).

The transgressivity of the extra-marital relations Tabu suggests is used to emphasize her closeness to her mother, implying that parental approval could potentially facilitate such a relationship, providing an erasure of tension and conflict parallel to on-screen plot devices. In an interview three years later, Tabu is more vocal about the gender dynamics of relationships, sexual desire and perceptions of heroines:

"[...] Sleeping around is no big deal for men. But for a woman giving a part of herself is sacred."

[...] Tabu elaborates, "When I talk about unconditional love, I also mean not having any expectations from your partner or having to live up to any expectations. I'd hate to live under any sort of pressure. By the same logic, I'd hate to impose any restrictions on my partner."

Surprisingly, the normally reticent actress goes ballistic on the subject of relationships. Perhaps it's a sign of maturity.

[...]

Tabu snorts fire, "It pains me when actresses are almost looked down upon as if they were sluts. We are not debauched. We come from good homes. Let me tell you there's much more debauchery outside. There are boys and girls who lead more colourful lives than we can imagine in our wildest dreams." (Pillai 1998: 62)

Tabu's statement illustrates how heroines enact both romantic love and desire by talking about them. However, the general, impersonal terms and examples Tabu employs serve to maintain her respectability while providing a forum for exploring issues of gender relations and sexual desire. Conversely, she adamantly salvages the respectability of heroines from the label of questionable sexual morality that the occupation had conventionally been associated with. In so doing, Tabu invokes the individual agency of other 'boys and girls who lead more colourful lives', as well as that of respectable, middle-class heroines. She

suggests that each of these groups has the prerogative and responsibility to determine the moral trajectory of their own lifestyles.

The Hindi film heroines' enacting of romantic love and heterosexual desire in the interviews printed in *Filmfare* not only follow the logic of on-screen romance, but also use their interview as a forum for discussing gender relations and the dynamics of (an aspired-to) conjugality. The eventuality of being-in and falling-in love with one's future husband is spoken of as a privileged and utopian experience, concordant with the ideas of Eva Illouz on romantic love (1997). In addition, in keeping with Rachel Dwyer's assertion that love and romance among the Indian middle classes constitute "... part of the creation of a bourgeois consciousness with new concepts of the person and of individuality" (2000: 1), the heroines' 'talking about' romantic love and desire seldom refers to the transgressivity of these elements and the challenge they pose to kinship ties as played out in the narratives of the Hindi film.

Urmila Matondkar speaks lightly of 'love', most likely out of an awareness of the potential implications for her career and the perception of her respectability. Labeled a 'sex symbol' at the time the following interview was published, Matondkar is careful to manage her image of uncontrolled sexuality with one of restraint. Her interview takes place in her home, in the presence of her mother.

[Journalist:] Me: What about the irresistible chemical reaction between men and women?
Urmila: Oh that, I fall in and out of love every day. I'm not sure about who's the right kind of guy for me yet. I'm not going to rush into an affair because I'm attracted to someone... or because it's very fashionable to have a boyfriend. (Unattributed 1996a: 34)

Although Matondkar invokes an underlying restraint that governs the 'real-life' acting out of love and desire, her speculation about 'the right kind of guy for [her]' is expressed in terms of personal, individual agency.

Pooja Bhatt, an outspoken heroine known for her partying and string of boyfriends, also invokes individual agency in her notion of romantic love and marriage.

[Journalist:] Do we hear wedding bells?
[Pooja Bhatt:] No, no, it's too early. I won't get married till I'm 26-27. And I'll do that only if I find the right man. Otherwise I'll wait till I'm 40-50. Marriage has to be for the right reasons, it's for keeps. (Mukherjee, R. 1993a: 18)

The idea of 'find[ing] the right man' and the vision of a life trajectory that presumes a love marriage parallel the on-screen logic of the Hindi cinema in many ways. However, the

conflicts and plot devices used to problematize and resolve romantic relationships in filmic narratives seem to be effaced in the statements of heroines off-screen.

Twinkle Khanna salvages respectability, prompted by the journalist, by invoking multiple markers of the on-screen vamp: smoking, drinking and lusting. At the same time, she renegotiates the terms of that respectability by deeming dating normal and healthy. She still maintains, however, that respect of her parents' wishes plays a factor in her decisions, and that marriage will form part of her life trajectory:

[Journalist:] How wild were you? Did you ever try smoking or drinking surreptitiously?

[Twinkle Khanna:] No, never. Neither do I like smoking or drinking, so I've always kept away from such things. Maybe I'll take a swig of champagne on my birthday, but that's it.

[Journalist:] Do you believe in love at first sight?

[Twinkle Khanna:] No, I believe in lust at first sight. It's always the physical attraction which grips you.

[Journalist:] Have you lusted?

[Twinkle Khanna:] Ummm... once I was in a friend's house and the doorbell rang. I opened the door to find this swell looking guy. And there were butterflies in my stomach. I think I was physically attracted to him. I just kept staring at him.

[Journalist:] Then?

[Twinkle Khanna:] Then what? I know him pretty well. He's part of my circle of friends.

[Journalist:] So is it lust or is it love?

[Twinkle Khanna:] No personal questions please!

[Journalist:] Just a thought. How come an attractive girl like you isn't seen with a guy nowadays?

[Twinkle Khanna:] I don't have a boyfriend at the moment. But I'm a normal girl and I date other men. (*Laughs*) So many men and so little time. I think dating is healthy. At this point in my career, I don't want to get seriously involved with anyone or have flings and one-night stands. No way. I just like to go out with my friends.

[Journalist:] What about commitment? Don't you want someone to share all your thoughts and feelings with?

[Twinkle Khanna:] Ya, but I'm stopping myself from falling in love. I'm not ready for commitment.

[Journalist:] But you can't plan falling in love.

[Twinkle Khanna:] That you can't. But you can restrain your impulses. [...]

[Journalist:] Finally, what do you think in terms of a live-in relationship?

[Twinkle Khanna:] First of all my parents would kill me. And if two human beings really care for each other, I can't understand how signing a piece of paper will change things. Rather than live-in, I'd marry the man I loved. That would make my parents happy too. (Pillai 1996c in *Filmfare*: 99)

Khanna's statements reflect many of the heroine issues discussed in this thesis, but equally important is the persistence of print media journalists with regard to specific themes that are pushed throughout and interview. The above excerpt illustrates the complicity of stars and journalists, not only in constructing star texts, but also in literally dictating the terms of a

particular discourse, in this case concerning the renegotiation of sexual morality and middle-class respectability of Hindi film heroines.

Several heroines seem to take for granted that they will marry for love, and that their parents will approve of their choice of partner. In so doing, they appear to presume a *filmī* trajectory for their own romantic relationships and life trajectories, but one that excludes the emotional limbo that separates and later reconciles *dharma* with desire through the course of film narratives. As such, the heroines presume the unproblematic reconciliation of *dharma* and desire in their own lives, factoring in a sense of responsibility or practicality that precludes the transgressivity of a romantic relationship... that ends in marriage. As for romantic relationships that do not end in marriage, parental opinion is seldom discussed until after a break-up.

i. 'We're just friends'

Romantic liaisons suggested by 'industry gossip' through the channels of the print media are often denied by heroines with the phrase that is considered a telling and disingenuous cliché used to cover up an 'affair': 'We're just friends'¹². The continuous suggestions by *Filmfare* journalists that co-stars were involved in a relationship, and the relentless pestering in almost every interview as to whether, when and with whom a heroine was to be imminently (or secretly) married, betray a perspective that regards contact between co-ed peers as illicit. The cynical attitude of the magazine journalists towards the stars' refutations of rumoured 'affairs' indicate a stance that neither fully identifies with nor fully condones *filmī* lifestyles, placing the media as part (or representative) of a larger, morally responsible, viewing public. Some of the major and ongoing refutations consistently made by heroines 'linked' in allegedly sexual, almost exclusively heterosexual¹³, relationships consist of asserting the possibility that inter-gender contact, even friendships, do not immediately and necessarily constitute sexual relations or any relationship of intimacy.

¹² For further reading on (very cynical) journalist perspectives on the clichés stars employ, largely as strategies to salvage respectability, see Jha 1998 in *Filmfare*.

¹³ I found only one instance between 1990 and 1999 that spoke of lesbian desire. In 1993, a sensational set of rumours linked the outspoken Anu Agarwal with newcomer Mamta Kulkarni and Pakistani-born actress Somy Ali. All three heroines were outspoken about their sexuality and were known for their 'exposure' or 'body display'. See the relevant interviews with Kulkarni (Saxena 1993 in *Filmfare*: 65) and Agarwal (Mukherjee, D. 1993 in *Filmfare*: 56)

In 1993, hero Sanjay Dutt was rumoured to be enamoured of heroine Madhuri Dixit, and was even said to be planning to marry her. His wife, Richa Dutt, denied that Dutt was seeking a divorce:

[Journalist:] Rumours of his affairs with his [Sanjay Dutt's] heroines are legion.

[Richa Dutt:] Look, if you're friendly with someone it doesn't mean that you have to marry that person. (Arora 1993 in *Filmfare*: 76)

Gossip 'linking' people in alleged affairs have been known to cause heroines, heroes and their families considerable heartache, embarrassment and resentment towards the media. Tabu complains about the difficulty of maintaining respectability and professionalism when salacious rumours between co-workers abound:

[...] But just because you share an excellent professional rapport with someone doesn't mean that you're emotionally involved with him. I enjoy working with Rekha Chinni Prakash too and because she's a woman it's very normal. But when you say that you like working with a man everyone's antenna goes up immediately.

[...]

Why can't people just accept that everything's normal with me and my director and colleagues instead of trying to unearth something 'abnormal'... something sinfully exciting? (Mukherjee, R. 1995 in *Filmfare*: 75)

The 'everyone' that Tabu accuses of rumour-mongering refers indirectly to the print media, but also suggests co-stars, and other players in the Hindi film industry. Conversely, a perception exists in the industry, as expressed by Tabu's interviewer, whereby any publicity is considered good publicity:

[Journalist:] Doesn't a scandal or a controversy often become necessary to stay in the news?
[Tabu:] Not true. A producer doesn't sign on an actress because he's read her interview and likes her quotes. My fan mail doesn't depend on whom I'm having an affair with. A red-hot scandal may keep you in the news for a month...and then what? People have very short memories. They don't even remember your films, it's only your last hit that counts. (Mukherjee, R. 1995 in *Filmfare*: 75)

Mamta Kulkarni was once involved in a scandal, which linked her with (married) hero Aamir Khan. Apparently a journalist had asked her what she thought of him, but her response – a jovial 'I love him!' – was purportedly twisted out of context by the print media according to Kulkarni.

[Mamta Kulkarni:] (*Guffaws*) God! People have such sick minds. There's nothing on between Aamir and me. He's a friend. I think no one can digest the fact that an attractive man and a beautiful girl can have a platonic relationship. Since everyone is either getting engaged or having an affair, no one can understand why I'm still unattached.

[Journalist:] You've never had an affair?

[Mamta Kulkarni:] Nope. (Nilesh 1995b in *Filmfare*: 65)

Heroine Preity Zinta describes friendly relations between co-stars as a normal aspect of a heroine's occupation, firmly refuting the equation of feigned intimacy compounded through multiple films with a heroine's 'real-life':

What about the chemical attractions while working with hunky guys day in day out? Preity harrumps [*sic*], "You work in an office, don't you have colleagues whom you're friendly with? Does that mean you're having an affair with all of them? Why is it assumed that actors and actresses have no morals? Please spare us the scandals." (Mishra 1999 in *Filmfare*: 76)

Through their denials, the heroines curb media suggestions of an uncontrolled sexuality, and remind journalists as well as readers of the nature of their professional commitments. The quality of 'professionalism' becomes crucial for the respectability of heroines whose employment activity entails feigning intimacy with multiple heroes, and performing suggestively not only for the camera, but for the gazes of the most often male filmmaker, cast and crew as well. The assertion that 'we're just friends' also attempts to separate the acting from 'real life', thus undermining the semiotic slippage that collapses the on-screen and off-screen identities of the Hindi film heroine.

An additional assertion made by several heroines is that a love and/or sexual relationship with a boyfriend neither guarantees, nor necessarily implies eventual marriage to that person. Manisha Koirala, while insisting that each of her relationships was intended to be exclusive and long-term, perhaps attempting to reclaim respectability with this assertion. Notably, however, the journalist fails to take her seriously on several occasions, framing Koirala's dramatics in the narration surrounding the actual interview (upon which the interviewee has little control), simultaneously highlighting and undermining the complicity of stars with publicity structures.

Since she's out of a two-year relationship with Nana Patekar, we yammer on about the right and wrong men in her life. "Oooh! don't ask me questions like that," she moans attempting to pout slightly, "I've dated some good guys and some absolute horrors.

"Whenever I've been in a relationship, I've always hoped that it will [*sic*] be for keeps. You never get into a relationship thinking it will be over before you know it. I don't see the need to drag on a dead relationship. I've always tried to look at the positive aspects of a relationship. [...]"

The words flow unchecked. A near seminar on the polemics of men, mores and morals ensues. [...]

"I think it's best just to be yourself. You should enjoy being what you are and make your life as meaningful as possible, irrespective of what others think of you."

Manisha almost takes on a Confucius-like mantle. I espy a few solemn self-help books on the rexine¹⁴ sofa in the vanity van. It figures. (Pillai 1997a in *Filmfare*: 38)

Despite the cynical doubt of the interviewer's commentary, Koirala's attempt at renegotiating the terms of a heroine's respectability through a justification of having numerous romantic relationships constitutes a subversion of on-screen logic. Although the desire for an exclusive relationship is expressed, an aura of bad judgement surrounds Koirala's statement. This impression is reinforced, it seems, by the interviewer's unimpressed reaction to Koirala's self-help books. The above example illustrates that the print media presents not all attempts at renegotiation favourably all the time.

Pooja Bedi, a model-turned-heroine who is most famous for her appearance in the ad campaign for Kama Sutra condoms¹⁵, describes the end of a relationship as a conflict of expectations about gender roles¹⁶:

I should have realised right away that our relationship couldn't last. We were as unalike as night and day. I tried to be the kind of girl he wanted me to be. I dressed differently, I stopped going to discos, I no longer dropped in on my men friends, I cooked candlelit dinners only for him. Then one fine morning I woke up to ask, "What the hell am I doing?" Why was I being pushed into playing a role in real-life as well? This wasn't the Pooja I knew.

I'm sure as time went by, Farhan would have expected me to bow my head and look at the floor. For the sake of marriage and babies, I may have become a submissive housewife for a year... may be [sic] five.. if I was very patient even ten years. And then I would have exploded. I'm too outspoken and modern to remain a *burqewali* ['woman who wears a burqa/long veil'] all my life. I could die a spinster tomorrow, but at least I won't have betrayed myself. It wouldn't have been fair to Farhan to let him believe in an illusion only to break it. So, the split was inevitable. (Mukherjee, R. 1993c in *Filmfare*: 50)

Bedi describes the tasks and behaviour of a respectable, dutiful housewife as a 'role', suggesting that the logic of an ideal on-screen heroine cannot ultimately be conflated with 'real-life', largely because the prerogative of the off-screen dancing heroine includes a renegotiation of the terms of gender relations and notions of sexual respectability. In addition, the terms of a conventionally expected respectability, as implied by Bedi's actions (regarding dress, discos, male friends), is described as outmoded. The renegotiated version

¹⁴ Rexine is fake leather. According to the interviews in *Filmfare*, a rexine sofa is the descriptive hallmark of a film star's private quarters, be it their apartment or their dressing room.

¹⁵ See Mazzarella 2001.

¹⁶ Bedi's boyfriend has a Muslim name. I haven't decided whether her description of him has anything to do with communal discourses of controlled sexuality, modernity versus 'backwardness', etc. I cannot determine whether the article, published in September 1993, several months after the intense Hindu-Muslim riots at the beginning of the year devastated Bombay, constitutes part of the reverberations and tensions regarding issues of religion and ethnicity in the aftermath of the riots. On discourses of controlled and uncontrolled sexuality by the RSS, an organization of the Hindu right, see Bacchetta 1994.

of respectability is not referred to as anything other than 'modern' and genuine by the heroine, and is largely inferred from the negative description above.

The assertion that a relationship neither guarantees, nor implies, marriage reinforces the independence of the film heroine, which is deeply entrenched in her financial independence as a successful working woman. Financial independence undermines not only the potential reliance of a heroine on her spouse and family, but also affords her a measure of independence with regard to conduct and behaviour by challenging the patriarchal structures that should protect and control her *lāj*, and by inference, her sexuality. The issues of professionalism and financial independence, as they relate to the notions of romantic love and heterosexual desire surrounding the figure of the dancing heroine, make important reference to the status of the heroine as a single 'career woman'.

c. Working and unmarried

The emergence of transformed models of femininity that are acceptable in the print media of the Hindi film industry appears to be contingent on the renegotiation of femininity, largely through the redefining of women's sexual morality. It also seems to depend on the determined new attitude of the heroines of the 1990s, who on many occasions are referred to as 'straight talkers'. As such, the new generation is said to be extremely frank about issues which are said to have scandalized heroines of previous years: boyfriends, sex as well as eroticism as both a respectable and necessary component of on-screen performance. The notion of 'sex appeal' came into vogue in the 1990s, and was described as sexy but not vulgar, while exuding a certain aura of 'Indianness' (see especially Unattributed, *Filmfare* 1998b: 78-83). The off-screen dancing heroines of the 1990s adamantly reworked the play between middle-class (sexual) respectability and the film actress' sex appeal, in tandem with their on-screen counterparts, by inhabiting different modes of representation through the different facets of their star image.

This section focuses on the career-oriented aspect of a heroine's image and how her status as an unmarried woman serves to define the channels through which her respectability, as well as the terms of her identity as a working woman, is negotiated. The following passage from an interview with Karisma Kapoor makes reference to several channels used to negotiate the film heroine's sexual respectability:

[Journalist:] It seems you were very upset with Dharmesh Darshan when he replaced you with Twinkle Khanna in *Mela*.

[Karisma Kapoor:] I don't want to talk about this. It's quite unpleasant. But I know how to get over disappointments. I'm a professional, I know there will always be other opportunities.

[Journalist:] You have been linked with Salman Khan and Akshaye Khanna. Do the rumours bother you?

[Karisma Kapoor:] Why should they? When I met Salman, after those kind [*sic*] of stories came out, there was no awkwardness at all. We just sat and laughed off the nonsense. No one can spoil our friendship. Our families have known each other for years.

Similarly Akshaye and I've known each other since we were kids. We've gone to birthday parties where we had fancy dress competitions. Then he went away to boarding school, we lost touch. Now that he's here, we're meeting up.

[Journalist:] Ah ha! You were partying with Akshaye on New Year's eve [*sic*].

[Karisma Kapoor:] Hey, take it easy. What's the big deal? Yeah, I went out with him in a group on the 31st. My parents knew with whom I was going out and where. They know all my friends. See, deep down I'm a very traditional Indian girl. I'd never do anything they'd object to.¹⁷

The day I like a guy, I'll announce it on the BBC! But right now, I'm not interested in a boyfriend. I'm very focused about my work. A boyfriend would want me to spend hours and hours with him. And I just don't have that kind of time for anything else besides my work. (Nilesh 1996 in *Filmfare*: 55)

Her statement includes allusions to professionalism, the natal family, sexual respectability, 'traditional' values, privacy and the media, all of which will be examined in further detail below. While Kapoor does not feel that an association with male peers affects her own respectability ('What's the big deal?'), she justifies her relation of friendship with the heroes named above by invoking both professionalism and her natal family. Kapoor reinforces the mutual exclusion of a career and romance (necessarily implying marriage) by emphasizing her determination to dedicate herself to her work. Conversely, the dedication to her work implies an avoidance of romantic entanglements, dutifully limiting relationships to those of feigned on-screen intimacy, and reassuring producers that her sense of professional duty constitutes a good investment.

In addition, Kapoor invokes her bond to her natal family as an indicator of her own respectability. The assertion of her parents' awareness and approval of her actions and activities, coupled with Kapoor's statement that she would 'never do anything they'd object to' serve to frame her self-identification as a 'very traditional Indian girl', thus cementing all perceptions of her respectability. As such, Kapoor uses parental approval as a means to illustrate the processes of social sanctioning, mirroring the plot resolution devices of many of the films discussed above (e.g. *HAHK*, *KKHH*, etc.). The transgressive aspect of the

¹⁷ Please note that this passage appears as a caption on the previous page of the interview as follows: "So what if Akshaye Khanna and I went out on New Year's eve?... I'm a traditional Indian girl. I'd never do anything wrong" (Nilesh 1996 in *Filmfare*: 54).

romantic relations alluded to by the interviewer is quashed by Kapoor's assertion that her friendship with the two heroes is sanctioned by larger friendships existing between, and thus sanctioned by, their families. As a working, unmarried woman Kapoor refers to her natal family and her relationship to her parents as a repository of her personal respectability.

Karisma Kapoor's above statement illustrates how the sexual respectability of the Hindi film heroine is articulated through the image of the dutiful career woman, the dutiful daughter, and how the two aspects are intertwined in the renegotiation of the respectability of the dancing heroine. Although the deployment of images of professionalism and familial domesticity are primarily used to renegotiate the respectability of heroines in their off-screen star personae in the 1990s, towards the end of the decade these images begin to figure in popular films, as plot devices negotiating the respectability of the on-screen heroine.

An example of the more explicit renegotiation of sexual morality and respectability is evident in the dialogue between journalists and heroines on the status of the commercial Hindi film actress. The media representatives are complicit in constructing the image of film stars, but they also take on an equally critical role. In a manner reminiscent of a caricatured form of the persistently conservative and pejorative view of the 'virtue' of female heroines, the Hindi film industry's media is notorious for reading sex – sexual relations, sexual titillation and what is termed 'vulgarity' – into all aspects of a heroine's 'real-life' and work. While on-screen vulgarity may boost an actress' career and gain her a loose reputation, implications extend from films into the heroine's off-screen life and vice versa. The rule of thumb seems to have been that heroines who acted, in their 'real' star lives, like ideal heroines were more likely to maintain their popularity with and the respect of their viewing audiences, as well as the rest of the industry. However, the dancing heroines of the 1990s consistently attempted to combine aspects of both strategies, constructing a persona that was both suggestively alluring and morally ideal, resisting the cubbyholing of their 'reputations'. *Filmfare* journalists also acknowledged the change in the heroine's on-screen persona, quoting stars to support their arguments:

If the viewer still has doubts about the fancy-free credentials of the heroine, then just wait for the 'obsession' dance [an on-screen staple sequence] that's erotic with a capital E.

Juhi [Chawla] who till recently was all strawberries and cream concedes reluctantly that she has had to compromise on her earlier stand of "No, no I can't do that!" Quite candidly, she states, "Perhaps our audiences still think of the hero and heroine as Ram and Seeta but when they crowd the theatres they're not looking for just a *devi* [transl. goddess]. They want a

whistle worthy act. And since we're the good-bad girls of today, we're called upon to do everything, from sighing and smiling to seducing the hero."

[...] Indian film heroines are no longer paranoid about their lily-white image. "I think the moralistic goody-goody heroine is a stereotype. She's had her day, she's a bore. I'm far too unconventional, I can't be tied down either in real-life or in the movies," says Anu Agarwal [...]

(Bharadwaj and Mukherjee 1994 in *Filmfare*: 27-29)

Although the above star quotes have a sensational quality, the statements of Chawla and Agarwal indicate that heroines increasingly recognize the dynamics of the construction of the heroine's identity as a function of their professional role.

i. On professionalism

In what seems to be a remarkable instance of informal consensus, heroines deflected attempts to tarnish their images (either by suggestion of illicit off-screen conduct or by the perception of any particular scene as 'vulgar' rather than 'aesthetic') by insisting on their claim to professionalism. The desire to project a female star as a 'professional actress' seeks to undermine the label that links her employment activity with her sexual morality, asexualizing her as a determined career-builder whose job description includes overtly expressing an apparently uncontrolled sexuality. The claim to professionalism resurfaces in a great number of interviews, especially when newcomers are in the process of defining their star image.

Professionalism is claimed in four principal ways, two of which explicitly reference issues of sexual respectability. One use of the claim to professionalism suggests that a heroine will carefully monitor her sexuality and, valuing her career over her desired eventual trajectory (at least temporarily), will assure her producers and directors that she will not even think of marrying – or becoming pregnant – for the next few years. A heroine who does otherwise is purportedly considered a 'risky investment' in an industry where film contracts are sometimes signed several years in advance. Raveena Tandon makes it clear that she will not compromise her professional commitments for marriage any time soon:

[Journalist:] Have you thought of marriage?

[Raveena Tandon:] I believe in the institution of marriage, I do want to get married and have kids but that will have to wait for another four-five years. My career has just started picking up. I want to enjoy the good time. (Qureshi, P. 1994 in *Filmfare*: 75)

Manisha Koirala refers to the anxiety that a romantic relationship causes producers, and emphasizes her professionalism by stating that her work as a heroine takes priority over other commitments, particularly over her then-boyfriend Sameer Rehman:

"I've never played around with my work, I've never let my personal hassles interfere with my professional commitments. [...] As far as marriage goes, give me a break, huh? Sameer's serious and yet fun-loving, when I'm with him I can forget that I'm an actress. But I don't have to marry Sameer. I don't even know if the relationship will last forever."

Several producers have been worrying about the Sameer in her life though. "Those who know me aren't worried but the new lot of directors are a bit wary," Manisha admits. "What if I turn up on the sets sozzled? What if I get pregnant? What if I run away to the U.S? Those who can even ask such questions about me underestimate me. I can never be selfish, and if I tell them that, they won't believe me. So I just keep quiet."

And has beau Sameer reconciled to the idea of a star wife? When he's in Bombay, he's spotted puffing Marlboros in her make-up room. Smiling sweetly, she says, "He'd better accept my career because it'll always come before him." (Mukherjee, R. 1994 in *Filmfare*: 28-29)

Koirala's statement constructs the image of a heroine who is concerned with her career above all else, clearly according her romantic relationship lesser importance. She inverts the priorities of the on-screen heroine, undermining the definition of the heroine's status in terms of sexual respectability, while simultaneously referring to issues evoking uncontrolled sexuality in order to establish an image of the career-oriented woman.

Secondly, affairs with co-stars are refuted through the claim of professionalism, of being a 'serious actress', which aims to salvage respectability. Invariably included in the denial of affairs is the assertion that 'we're just friends', as discussed above. The gossip column in an issue of *Filmfare* provides media commentary on this strategy of salvaging respectability:

Contagious, very contagious. Ever since Sridevi and Madhuri Dixit cried themselves hoarse – coughdrops anyone? – that they're single and super-serious about their careers, every Eena, Meena and Sheeba¹⁸ are echoing the same homilies to put off newshounds off their trail. [...]

Dear Tabs [= Tabu] also asked tearfully, "Why am I being linked with David Dhawan? C'mon *yaar* [transl. buddy, man], he's a friend and that's about all." Now did anyone say anything to the contrary, huh?

Adds the *ruk ruk* [= song reference] girl, "If someone granted me a wish, I'd just ask for one thing – please, please lord [*sic*] will journalists quit asking me about Sanjay and Raveena Tandon? I haven't ever said a word about Raveena, so I don't know why controversies are still being stirred up... Why can't I be asked about my career? I'm single and very serious..."

Oh oh, the 'serious fever' is spreading. (Unattributed 1994b in *Filmfare*: n.p.)

¹⁸ N.B. Consider 'Eena, Meena and Sheeba' as an equivalent to the expression 'Tom, Dick and Harry'.

Media cynicism regarding stars is usually relegated to the gossip columns, but on occasion, the incredulity expressed above finds its way into the interviews with stars. Cynical journalism simultaneously supports and undermines the complicity in the media construction of star texts. However, the above passage indicates that Filmfare journalists employ a degree of reflexivity with regard to the heroines' strategies of constructing a star image.

In a third example, professionalism is claimed with reference to conduct at the workplace, that is, on the sets. Several stars are notorious for showing up hours late, cancelling shots at the last minute, making expensive demands and throwing tantrums while shooting, thus incurring additional costs to the film's budget. Conversely, however, rumours about a particular star, founded or unfounded, can damage a star's reputation in the industry. In asserting her professionalism, a heroine may make excuses for her conduct or she may assert that the director or co-stars were behaving unprofessionally, but maintains that she is an unproblematic and cooperative actress/employee to work with. Model-turned-heroine Aishwarya Rai fends off persistent attacks to her acting ability:

[Journalist:] Does it hurt when you're called a non-actress?

[Aishwarya Rai:] Boy it does. Just give me time. I'll prove everyone wrong because I'm growing every day. [...]

[Journalist:] In retrospect would you say that [the film] *Aur Pyar Ho Gaya* was conceived on a paper napkin? It certainly set you back professionally.

[Aishwarya Rai:] Post-mortems are an awful waste of time. In any case, I'm not into washing dirty linen. [...]

[Journalist:] Your va-va-voom looks have worked against you as an actress. Right?

[Aishwarya Rai:] Look, I can't fight the looks I've been born with. If I'm blessed with good looks, so be it. But for Pete's sake, don't knock my hard work, my professionalism. I'm only three-films-old. I haven't given any of my directors any reason to complain. (Pillai 1999 in *Filmfare*: 30)

Rai's statement echoes many others in which heroines defend their acting ability. For many, it seems, a heroine's acting ability is equivalent to her professional competence, and thus is an essential point to establish in order to renegotiate the uncontrolled sexuality of the heroine's star persona.

Madhuri Dixit defines the career-oriented attitude that makes professionalism both possible as well as desirable:

[Journalist:] Why are movie performers so self-absorbed?

[Madhuri Dixit:] I don't know why such a hoo-ha [*sic*] is made about actors and actresses. This is like any other profession. My job revolves around thinking about my next shoot, or my make-up or my hairstyle. I'm paid to look good and act well. I can't afford to goof up. When I'm at home I don't sit in front of the mirror with my vanity case and powder puff. So I don't understand why it's said that stars are self-obsessed.

I don't think I have alienated myself from people or the real world. Okay so I don't travel by trains, buses and auto-rickshaws. But believe me I don't have any burning desire to do so. (Pillai 1996a in *Filmfare*: 29)

Echoing Dixit's statement, several heroines describe the decision to enter the film industry as just another career move, undermining the stigma attached to heroines while invoking the issues of respectability conventionally associated to that stigma: vanity, unrestrained sexuality, etc.

Finally, the claim to professionalism is used in cases involving slander, either as made about a heroine or as she is previously purported to have made about another celebrity. A stereotype associated with the Hindi film heroine that seems to have been gradually downplayed during the 1990s is that of heroines as jealous, vindictive women who engage in mudslinging. By claiming to be professional, a heroine suggests that she will not engage in such mudslinging. This can either mean that she does not intend to respond to remarks made about her, or it can reinforce a denial of statements previously printed, usually accompanied by an accusation of misquoting or fabrication by an unscrupulous media. Karisma Kapoor has repeatedly described herself as a professional in order to absolve herself of purported involvement in arguments and media wars with colleagues:

[Karisma Kapoor:] Why don't you stop adding to this media war between Raveena [Tandon] and me?

[Journalist:] Are your squabbles with Ayesha Jhulka, Manisha Koirala, Pooja Bhatt and Divya Bharati also media manufactured? Why can't you get along with any of your colleagues?

[Karisma Kapoor:] On my side there's no ill feeling. I don't even know these girls well. I've worked only with Raveena and Ayesha; there's been no direct contact with the others. I'm a professional, I don't let myself get worked up over such petty matters. (Mukherjee, R. 1993b in *Filmfare*: 36)

[Journalist:] It's also believed that you don't want to work with Ajay Devgan after *Suhaag*. True?

[Karisma Kapoor:] Look, I'm a professional. I have no hassles working with any actor. When it comes to work, personal differences don't matter to me at all. (Bharadwaj 1995 in *Filmfare*: 59)

In her interviews, Kapoor keeps the drama of on-screen narratives strictly separate from her professional duty as an actress, although the interviewer's questions may indicate otherwise. She uses references of devotion to her career to dismiss elements or insinuations that could be damaging, or that could conflict with the construction of her image as a dedicated heroine.

In each case of claiming to be 'professional', the heroine asserts her dedication to her career, thus marking herself as a good investment of time and money. The claim also resonates with notions of responsibility and restraint, compensating for the perception of an uncontrolled sexuality with a controlled professionalism. In addition, deeming the Hindi film heroine as a career option serves to establish a sense of duty and obligation surrounding the profession. The claim of professionalism articulates, as Richard Dyer notes, that stars are made for profit, as well as that star images and personae are involved in making themselves into commodities (1987: 5). In the Hindi film industry, the 'good' or dedicated heroine is contrasted with the troublesome and unprofessional heroine. This distinction not only serves to simultaneously support and undermine the issues of sexual respectability associated with the Hindi film heroine, but also indicates the reflexivity with which heroines of the 1990s acknowledge their star personae as marketable commodities.

ii. On being 'tough'

The shrewd career-oriented attitude that seems desirable for heroines to espouse is that of being 'tough', an attribute that seems to accompany the professional stance. The control and restraint that professionalism implies effectuate an erasure of issues of gender and sexuality. The heroine asexualizes her employment activity by calling it her profession, maintaining that it also has specific standards and norms that 'come with the territory'. In addition, by claiming professionalism, the heroine evades the connotations of 'prostitution' – of which middle-class perceptions of courtesans and *devadāsīs* are reminiscent – associated with her performance, or 'dancing', of sexuality for monetary compensation. The label 'professional' implies not only an employee's responsibility to fulfil certain required duties in exchange for wages, but also constitutes a valiant effort to render the element of sexual morality invisible, or to render the issue of morality redundant in light of the duties that a film heroine is expected to perform. As such, the claim to professionalism effectively renders the film heroine's enacting of sexual desire part of the *dharma* associated with her particular employment activity.

Furthermore, the *dharma* associated with the profession of the film heroine requires her to excel at performing the duties that she is expected to fulfil. Some heroines describe excellence in terms of acting well or to performing as the director demands to the best of one's abilities. However, through the course of the interviews in *Filmfare*, both the heroines'

statements and the textual commentary interspersed by journalists belie their expectations of an excellent heroine: An actress who successfully negotiates her performance to the satisfaction of filmmakers and audiences alike as a function of her sense of middle-class respectability. The stakes of strategic and shrewd attitude on the part of Hindi film heroine is evident in the following episode narrated by Kajol:

[Kajol, of her sister Tanisha, referred to as Titch:]

Though she's three-and-a-half-years [sic] younger than me, she has taught me a lot. She's my possession, she's my living doll. Titch is street smart and savvy which [sic] I'm not.

When she was just 14-years-old or so, she'd ask the most cunning questions. I was asked to hear out scripts even before *Bekhud*. In the course of narrating a script, a guy said, "And then you'll make love."

Titch immediately interrupted to ask, "How exactly will you shoot the scene? Will it be a rape or a romantic scene?" The guy was so shocked that he stammered, "D..d..don't worry, it'll be shot aesthetically." Now Titch understood that he was glossing over things. On my part, I was totally naïve [sic]. (Mohamed 1998b in *Filmfare*: 81)

Kajol's anecdote demonstrates the potential dangers of naïve contract negotiation. A professional stance that is less than vigilant suggests not only that a heroine's agency in managing her star image is undermined, but also that a 'loose' attitude with regard to her personal morality allowed her to either be convinced of performing indiscretions on-screen, or to be manipulated into doing so.

Most respected among heroines in the print media are those who seem to perform as an object of desire without compromising their personal standards of sexual morality. This is evident in the association of a heroine's off-screen morality with her on-screen performances, effectively suggesting that if a heroine could be convinced to act in a particular way for a film, her performance would constitute a direct reflection of her personal moral standards. As a result, the desired stance of the professional film heroine of the 1990s is often referred to as 'being tough'.

The dancing heroines of the 1990s, many of whom entered the film industry in the late 1980s or early 1990s, began referring to the attribute of 'being tough' in *Filmfare* interviews starting in 1995. At that point, several important scandals involving the heroines had transpired in previous years. Madhuri Dixit and Karisma Kapoor had sparked off major controversies in 1993 and 1994. They had performed in song and dance sequences that had suggestive or double-meaning lyrics (e.g. Dixit's *Choli ke peeche kya hai*, transl. 'What's under my blouse?' in *Khalnayak* 1993), that were suggestively choreographed (e.g. Govinda looking under Karisma Kapoor's skirt in *Raja Babu* 1994, dir. David Dhawan), or that were

suggestively shot (e.g. shots of Karisma Kapoor's gyrating buttocks in *Raja Babu*). In addition, Manisha Koirala had been involved in a scandal that questioned her professional conduct and focussed on her purported consumption of alcohol. Several of the newer heroines had been involved in episodes of mudslinging. Many heroines had refuted allegations of having affairs with their co-stars, and of fighting with co-stars or film directors. By 1995, numerous heroines described their becoming familiar with the workings of the Hindi film industry as 'becoming tough'.

After the censorship scandal focussing on Karisma Kapoor's dance performances in *Khuddar* (1994) and *Raja Babu* (1994), Kapoor reconciles the experiences to her self-styled image:

[Journalist:] Mercifully the film [*Coolie No.1* dir. David Dhawan] steered clear of vulgarity.

[Karisma Kapoor:] That's right. It was thought that we could hit the bull's eye only with a *Sarkailo khatiya*¹⁹. *Coolie No.1* was a slap on the face of all those who keep pulling me down... I have learnt a lot. I have tasted success and failure at a very young age. I cry and get depressed easily. Even a botched-up shot can upset me. So many heroines have bitched about me... the hard knocks made me fall but I've stood up on my feet again... with my head held up high. I have become very tough. I also think I have become a better person and a better actress. (Nilesh 1996 in *Filmfare*: 54)

Kapoor suggests that she may have been exploited or criticized in the past, but that her 'toughness' will allow her to salvage and maintain her respectability and sense of professionalism in the future.

Manisha Koirala's statement below describes the process of becoming 'tough' by weathering media scandals. She also refers to the element of a protective agent, most often either a parent or industry mentor, which often serves to help heroines navigate the path to commercial success:

[Journalist:] How do you survive Manisha baiters?

[Manisha Koirala:] I've survived. I can be tough. Just because I don't have a godfather or a guardian angel doesn't mean that anyone can take cheap potshots at me. I'm a gutsy Leo [i.e. astrological sign] girl. I may look vulnerable but I can fight my own battles. There have been days when I've felt insecure, I've spent sleepless nights, I've cried into my pillow. But tomorrow's another day. No crisis is too big for me. (Pillai 1995a in *Filmfare*: 53).

Several prominent heroines of the 1990s, including Kajol, Tabu, Karisma Kapoor and Pooja Bhatt, come from 'film families' or families that know the workings of the Hindi film

¹⁹ *Sarkailo khatiya*, roughly translated as 'slide the cot [over here]', was a song and dance sequence in the 1994 film *Raja Babu* (dir. David Dhawan) that was much criticized for its vulgar choreography and double-meaning lyrics (see *Filmfare* special issue: June 1994).

industry. However, for those who do not have the benefit of being born into the industry, an aesthetic of the independent, self-made heroine seems to be increasingly espoused or favoured in the course of star interviews. The independent and self-sufficient attitude converges with the stance of professionalism that attempts to efface the issues of sexual respectability conventionally associated with the film heroine, while concurrently seeking to salvage middle-class respectability in effectuating that erasure.

Not all heroines maintain that they are tough, but many acknowledge 'toughness' as a defensive strategy of self-preservation. Madhuri Dixit articulates both aggressiveness and 'toughness' as desirable attributes:

Next: I want to know if there's anything about herself that sends her up the wall. "There is, there is!" she answers. "Sometime I want to climb a dozen walls because I'm not assertive enough. My weak point is that I'm very easygoing. Since I give in to anything, I've been often taken for a ride. Also, I'm upset when a film I've sloged for doesn't work out well. Sometimes my dresses are badly managed and there are continuity lapses. All this bothers me a lot but I can't do a thing! I'm going to get aggressive, wait and watch. [...] I intend to be quite cautious about the films that I'm going to sign. No *chaalu* [transl. prevalent, cunning, slang: titillating, vulgar] stuff for me!" (Unattributed 1995 in *Filmfare*: 34)

At the time the above statement was published, Dixit was quite near the peak of her career, having released the hit *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* (1994, dir. Sooraj Barjatya) the year before. As a very prominent heroine, Dixit's statement implies that her success can be used as leverage in negotiating the terms and trajectory of her career. In addition, Dixit suggests that commercial success constitutes, to a certain degree, the definitive salvaging of respectability.

'Toughness' is understood as the quality of successfully negotiating the difficulties of being a Hindi film heroine. The term implies that a heroine does not allow herself to be manipulated into compromising situations by filmmakers, and that a heroine acknowledges the performed desirability required by her profession. Equally suggested by the term is a heroine's understanding of the nature and demands of the commercial film market, and her ability to deal competently with fans, journalists, and salacious gossip that could be injurious to her reputation and career. As such, a heroine who can competently navigate the channels of the Hindi film industry is highly valued. However, her negotiations must address the rubric of sexual morality and respectability that are associated with her work, despite the claims of professionalism that attempt to efface these links.

iii. On exposure and 'vulgar' performances

With regard to feminine sexuality, the commercial Hindi cinema is generally recognized to thrive on a combination of sexual titillation and ideal standards of morality. By portraying the equally implausible circumstances of uncontrolled and controlled moral universes, the popular Hindi cinema appeals to several aspects of desire, notably invoking both illicit and idealized desires. State-controlled film censorship presumes to control the degree of illicit content, and although their standards on conventional taboos such as kissing had relaxed considerably by the 1990s, occasional scandals have provoked 'crackdowns' by the Board of Censors. In 1994, exacerbated by the *Choli ke peeche* [transl. 'Under the blouse'] sequence executed by Madhuri Dixit in *Khalnayak* (1993 dir. Subhash Ghai), song and dance sequences from *Khuddar* (*Sexy sexy sexy mujhe log bolen*, transl. 'People call me sexy sexy sexy'), from *Raja Babu* (*Sarkailo khatiya*, transl. 'Slide the cot [over here]') and from *Dulara* (1994, dir. Vimal Kumar, *Meri pant bhi sexy*, transl. 'My pants are sexy too') caused a public furor over film censorship and the limits of decency. The issue of vulgarity in films was even mentioned in the Indian parliament. A *Filmfare* journalist comments:

The brouhaha over vulgar songs and obscenity in films is, in fact, diverting attention from more serious issues – like the degrading portrayal of women and excessive violence which are routinely used as box-office ploys.

The self-appointed protectors of women's modesty, who go about tearing up film posters and rushing into law courts over frivolous issues, have never stopped to ask what thinking women feel about the matter. (Gahlot 1994 in *Filmfare*: 88)

Karisma Kapoor, who figured in several of the films under scrutiny by politicians and film censors, was confronted with harsh criticism with regard to her performances. *Filmfare* extrapolates on the role of sexual permissiveness with regard to the Hindi film heroine. However, restraint is spoken of the more respectable tendency, as purposeful 'vulgarity' is spoken of in terms of the exploited woman rather than the heroine-as-agent opting for increased permissiveness:

Karisma Kapoor, a promising young actress from a respected film family may have become a symbol of the neo-sexual revolution in the Hindi cinema. But there is also the question of the exploitation of actresses. Madhuri Dixit denies that *Choli ke peeche* was vulgar. And Karisma Kapoor reiterates in every interview that she is a professional who simply obeys the director's instructions.

Very few actresses protest when they're asked to break into titillating dances. Reportedly, Juhi Chawla was very unhappy about her dance sequences in *Andaz*, but she didn't refuse to do them. In recent times, only Ayesha Jhulka protested when a body double was used for a nude scene in *Dalaal*. But the issue remains unresolved.

Today's actresses approach 'exposing' as a professional necessity. If they don't do it, somebody else will – like Shilpa Shirodkar or Mamta Kulkarni who revel in their sexuality. Is this an indication of liberation? (Gahlot 1994: 89)

Conversely, the above statement reinforces the conflation of on-screen performances and off-screen morality, by indicating that heroines are expected to exercise their agency in refusing to enact certain scenes that would compromise their respectability.

State censors purportedly have the power to decide and enforce the borders of acceptable femininity. However, censors are often accused of intervening only eclectically and of being inconsistent in their evaluation of different films:

As always, censorship in practical terms, did not indicate any uniformity in the application of the guidelines. While some films got away with blue murder, others had an arduous passage through the revising committees and if matters were not sorted out still, producers carted their reels to the appellate tribunal. (Unattributed 1994a in *Filmfare*: 18)

Notably, *Filmfare* journalists seem to espouse a perspective that sympathizes with the commercial film industry. Nonetheless, journalists often seem to hold actors and actresses, as well as directors, responsible for on-screen performances. Ultimately, however, the industry purports to follow a policy of self-censorship rather than have scenes cut by the Censor Board, or face a public outcry.

As noted above, a heroine's on-screen performance is seen as reflecting directly on her off-screen 'real-life' morality. The logic that allows a direct association between the respectability of an actress and the role she plays is premised on the notion that a respectable heroine would not allow herself to be compromised and manipulated into performing morally questionable actions. For example, Shilpa Shirodkar's on-screen performances were criticized outside her interview, in paratexts (titles, captions, descriptions, etc.) over which the star has little or no control. The caption to an interview that contained more description than dialogue appeared as follows:

In every film Shilpa Shirodkar's been returning with a baffling repeat performance. She wears a sexy something, sings a song and then there's a messy rape scene. Why is she allowing herself to be exploited? (Table of contents, *Filmfare* August 1991)

The caption frames the Hindi film industry as a dangerous place, teeming with exploiters of innocent aspiring heroines. Notably, Shirodkar is given the benefit of the doubt with regard to her personal sexual morality, although the caption indicates that the heroine's professional indiscretion with regard to performances is damaging her respectability.

Individual heroines differ on the point of 'exposure', some refuting that particular scenes were vulgar, or that they were manipulated in any way. The interviewers often frame the heroine's responses in a different light. Divya Bharati claims moral neutrality for exposure, although the interviewer's questions portray her as reckless:

[Journalist:] They say you never bother about the film you sign, that your mother and secretary decide things for you.

[Divya Bharati:] They decide on a film if the banner [i.e. production company] is good. As for the role, I listen to the story myself and decide whether I want to do it. However, not every film turns out the way you wanted it to. Somewhere along the line you have to make compromises.

[Journalist:] Does compromising mean exposing? [...]

[Divya Bharati:] Ultimately it's talent that counts but you have to look good on screen too. If the character calls for exposure what's wrong with it?

[Journalist:] You belong to a conservative family and were initially a simple and innocent girl. What brought about this drastic change? You've started calling journalists names, what happened to your cultured background?

[Divya Bharati:] I've never called anybody names. It's the press who spread untrue stories about me. [Journalist:] (*She seems to have forgotten that she'd used the words 'sadists' and 'bastards' to describe the fourth estate*) (Bharadwaj 1991 in *Filmfare*: 21)

The interview's distinctly reprimanding and accusatory tone does not accept the heroine's agency in determining her stance on exposure.

Largely in later interviews, journalists are less aggressive in their disapproval of exposure. Ayesha Jhulka's conservative stance towards exposure is also described as a potential hindrance to her career:

[Caption:] Today she [i.e. Ayesha Jhulka] continues to work in films, but on her own terms. No revealing clothes, no bathing scenes. Will her resolve fetch her the coveted roles or will she get stuck in a rut like Neelam bagging only the occasional film? [...]

[Journalist:] But, in order to establish yourself in the industry don't you feel it is necessary to make a compromise initially as regards your role and opt for the big banners, films with bigger stars?

[Ayesha Jhulka:] I don't believe in compromising. [...] I have no regrets about rejecting this film or *Prem Qaidi*. *Prem Qaidi* was a heroine-oriented project but I was required to wear a bikini in one scene. Now I have nothing against westernised clothes but I definitely not wear anything which reveals too much of my body. (Bharadwaj 1992 in *Filmfare*: 23)

Journalists acknowledge, it seems, that a successful heroine's career must strike a balance between virtuous and sensuous elements, between the erstwhile ideal heroine and the vamp. Rendering that balance believable and acceptable, however, is a feat of managing and constructing star images.

Mamta Kulkarni is aggressively defensive while emphasizing her own agency with regard to exposing, using multiple elements to negotiate her respectability:

[Journalist:] Okay, okay. You're just a very nice girl.

[Mamta Kulkarni:] I'm a nice girl but I'm no saint. [...] I don't know what you guys think of me... you all make me out to be a sinner or a paragon of virtue. One magazine even asked me if I wasn't tired of being Miss Goody Goody. And others were amused when I said I perform pooja every day. I've also been called 'vernacular'. If worshipping God tantamounts to being 'vernier' then fine. I'm proud that I am a 'vernier'.

[Journalist:] Do you feel exploited when you're asked to wear skimpy clothes for the movies and photo-sessions?

[Mamta Kulkarni:] Look man, nobody can force Mamta Kulkarni to do anything.

[Journalist:] Was the backless scene in *Karan Arjun* necessary?

[Mamta Kulkarni:] At first, I was hesitant to do it. Then Gudduji (Rakesh Roshan) convinced me that it was important. According to me, I didn't look cheap or vulgar. In fact, I think I looked quite cute. (Nilesh 1995b in *Filmfare*: 65)

Kulkarni is careful to frame her star image as neither an epitome of the unrestrained vamp (i.e. 'I'm a nice girl'), nor of the virtuous ideal heroine (i.e. 'I'm no saint'). Instead, however, of completely evading either label, Kulkarni specifies that she embodies some combination of the two. Kulkarni is most well known for her topless pose on the cover of *Stardust* that resulted in, among other forms of criticism, a court case against her for indecent exposure. She reclaims respectability in invoking her religious devotion, referencing an on-screen strategy that also uses piety as a marker of a heroine's respectable desirability. In addition, the agency Kulkarni espouses ('Look man, nobody can force Mamta Kulkarni to do anything') is neither attacked nor supported by the interviewer's questions, indicating that the media's attitude towards a heroine's decision-making prerogative has softened since Divya Bharati's 1991 interview.

The balance between restraint and acknowledging the professional necessity for permissiveness seems most shrewdly articulated by Sonali Bendre, to media accolades:

Till now, Sonali has insisted on a touch-me-not no exposure policy. How long can she continue to be holier-than-thou? "Exposure has different connotations for every actress," she replies. "Certain things which you consider taboo may not be so shocking for other heroines. What looks good on one heroine may look vulgar on me. My stand is clear – I won't go beyond a certain limit. Even after that, if a producer wants me to do his film, he's welcome to talk to me... Really, shorts can look decent on someone. But a saree can be made to look vulgar if it is worn below the navel and such stuff... Exposure is very subjective. (Dinesh Nair 1995 in *Filmfare*: 88)

Bendre's statement illustrates the process of renegotiating the Hindi film heroine's sexual respectability by neither fully condoning or normalizing exposure, nor by fully condemning it. Bendre acknowledges the subtleties in managing or negotiating a star image with regard to exposure and middle-class respectability. In addition, the interviewer's comments, rather than denouncing or dismissing the heroine's exposure policy as naïve, expresses an awareness of the dilemma that exposure affords the Hindi film heroine. In the above

statement, the journalist's questions border on sympathetic in tone, and ask the heroine to define her particular negotiation of a complex issue.

Exposure and on-screen vulgarity threaten the respectability of film heroines through industry criticism as channelled through the print media, through the Board of Censors as a state-controlled enforcer of the limits of acceptable representations of femininity, and through public opinion as expressed via box-office returns and, occasionally, by public protests and backlashes. In examining the purportedly increasingly explicit content of Hindi films, including the female protagonist's fusion of elements previously associated with the ideal heroine with those linked to the vamp character, *Filmfare* journalists cite coping strategies to deal with changing audiences and satellite television: "As family audiences became more partial than ever before to home entertainment – via the sky channels – the front-benchers²⁰ had to be catered to" (Unattributed 1994a in *Filmfare*: 18). Conversely, however, journalists also assert that the middle-class attitude toward sexuality also constituted demand for on-screen explicitness: "ad agency guys [...] believed that sexual awareness was an index of sophistication. The support for vulgar songs and films comes from the upwardly mobile class" (Krishnan in Gahlot 1994 in *Filmfare*: 89). Hindi film heroines, in their *Filmfare* interviews during the 1990s, espouse a renegotiation of the acceptability of a transformed attitude towards female sexuality. However, their renegotiation clearly places a priority on managing their star images, both off- and on-screen, in terms of sexual respectability, despite the connotations of professionalism that imply an erasure of these terms.

iv. On redefining the 'sex symbol'

In an alternative strategy of renegotiating the bounds of acceptable femininity, heroines who have been labelled 'sex symbols' attempt to redefine the respectability of that role without, however, refusing its label. Throughout the 1990s, increasing numbers of heroines, especially newcomers, were deemed 'sex symbols'. Instead of rejecting the term, many heroines embraced it as definitive of their particular popularity. In order to redeem the scandalous and morally pejorative connotations of the term, several heroines used the fact of

²⁰ The term 'front-benchers' refers to the lower middle-class male demographic, or those who buy the cheapest seats at the front of cinema halls. These audiences are generally credited with appreciating extravagant spectacle, violence and titillating sequences rather than 'wholesome family entertainment'.

their popularity – especially among women and girls – as the principle justifying the respectability of their ‘sex symbol’ label.

Whereas at the beginning of the 1990s, heroines disparaged the ‘sex symbol’ label, later heroines seemed to renegotiate the terms of their respectability by accepting, and even embracing, the label. The ambiguity of the sex symbol label, constituting the perpetual and purposefully enacted desirability of a given heroine, is evident in the following comments regarding Madhuri Dixit: “[...] she’d be immediately slotted as India’s number one sex symbol, a tag that’s strangely reserved for the crass, dare-bare, second-rung starlets nowadays” (Mohamed 1992 in *Filmfare*: 7). The validity of the journalist’s opinion is evident in Shilpa Shirodkar’s early refutation of the sex symbol label:

I swear I’ve never made a conscious effort to be projected as a sex symbol. Shilpa in a frock or Shilpa in a saree looks equally sexy. I don’t feel I’m a sexy person, but that’s the way people see me. I look absolutely different without make-up, I look very simple and when I go out with my friends, people don’t recognise me. So the question of attracting wolf whistles or cat calls doesn’t arise.

[...] the press makes me out to be a she-devil. That’s unfair because I’m not. (Khurana 1992 in *Filmfare*: 45-6)

Shirodkar attempts to dissociate her off-screen, personal image from the ‘sexy’ attribute that implies a purposeful, enacted and necessarily unrestrained sexuality. She salvages respectability by refuting the label, and by refuting the conflation of her on-screen performances with her personal star image.

In later interviews, heroines seem to increasingly accept the sex symbol label and thus, be increasingly comfortable with their own desirability. Mamta Kulkarni takes the acknowledgment of her desirability as a compliment, though she is careful throw an image of measured restraint into the balance of respectability:

[Journalist:] How do you react to the label of the sex kitten?

[Mamta Kulkarni:] Very well, thank you. I’m proud of my sexy image. Audiences like their heroines to be hot, red hot. So why should I be embarrassed if people call me sexy? Every girl wants to be attractive to men. I’d be offended if people said I was flat... But sexy is just another four-letter word. On-screen I may look very sexy but in real life I’m quite different.

[Journalist:] How different?

[Mamta Kulkarni:] I’m very conscious about the way I walk, talk and sit. Today, my beauty has become part of my personality; earlier, I’d feel very awkward if a man looked at me twice. Even now, I try to avoid attracting attention. I dress soberly, I don’t wear make-up when I go out. Still it’s very difficult to sit at a party without being stared at. I guess I haven’t lost all my inhibitions yet.

[Journalist:] Despite your inhibitions, you continue to issue provocative statements like ‘I’m a virgin.’

[Mamta Kulkarni:] I just wanted to set the record straight, I was stating a fact, I wasn’t bragging that I’m a virgin.

After I'd posed topless for a magazine cover, there was this misconception that I was "easily available." I wanted to stop men from making passes, I couldn't let them behave lecherously. I thought my statement would make it clear that I'm not interested in going out with guys. So believe me... I swear I'm still a virgin. (Jahagirdar-Saxena in *Filmfare*: 67-8)

Kulkarni's heavy-handed negotiation of the sexual respectability of her star image, the interviewer treats her with muted cynicism. Notably, Kulkarni interiorizes the desirability of the sex symbol label by emphasizing that 'every woman wants to be attractive to men'. She focuses on her own agency in enacting desirability rather than on the desiring audience. Conversely, however, Manisha Koirala is clear on the professional asset that sex appeal constitutes:

[Journalist:] Does it bother you that there must be thousands of males who fantasise about you in a prurient fashion... that you are a sex object?

[Manisha Koirala:] What's wrong with that? If men find me desirable, that's fantastic. Even women fantasise about the heroes... so males are sex objects too. There's no need to be coy or prudish about one's sex appeal. (Pillai 1996e in *Filmfare*: 68)

Koirala concedes the importance of desirability for heroes and heroines. In mentioning heroes, her statement acknowledges female heterosexual desire while refuting that being desired tarnishes sexual respectability. Nonetheless, the erasure or level ground that Koirala seeks to establish in asserting that female sexual desire for heroes compensates for male audiences' desire for heroines is undermined by the conventional association of the Hindi film heroine (and vamp character) to the primary function of enacting an object of desire, rather than an actor in the course of film narratives.

v. On Natal Family Ties

In addition to asserting the respectability of their desirability, another tactic to ensure the 'actual' or 'real-life' moral purity of Hindi film heroines is the insistence on the integrity of their family background and upbringing. Despite recognizing the professional necessity for permissiveness, heroines nonetheless perceive the sway that a morally sound image supposedly holds over viewing audiences, as negotiated in the above citations of Mamta Kulkarni in particular. For the daughters of prominent families, especially, conduct and attitude is seen as directly reflecting on the reputation of the natal family. In addition, as unmarried working women who often reside in joint families, heroines are still strongly linked with their natal families, who seemed to function in the interviews as the symbolic protectors of the off-screen heroine's *lāj* (honour/chastity), or as those responsible for exercising control or restraint over her sexuality. As a result, a heroine's relationship with

her family, inferred as imbued with wholesome 'family values' by default, is considered indicative of her respectability.

Early on in their careers, several newcomers featured with their family members in a *Filmfare* segment entitled 'Relative Values'. The segment regularly featured photos of a heroine with either one or both parents, as well as interviews in which the stars and their relatives gave their mutual perceptions of one another. The interviews served to foster intimacy with the newcomers as respectable heroines and dutiful daughters coming from respectable families. Juhi Chawla's statements in a 'Relative Values' segment suggest how certain forms of publicity served to explicitly reinforce the respectability of new heroines:

As I grew up Mum and Dad began to trust me. And because I was given all the freedom, I never really misused it. [...]

Mum and Dad's attitude hasn't really changed towards me because I'm successful, for them I am still their little girl, not Juhi Chawla the star! Now they only excuse my laziness at home. They don't scold me if I sit around and watch movies. Even though I have moved out to Versova [i.e. a Bombay neighbourhood], I go home often and they come across to see if things are okay. They know I am lazy and can't manage a home on my own.

If you ask me what I really admire in my mother or for that matter in my father, I cannot pinpoint any one quality. But if I were told to choose a new set of parents for myself, you bet I'd pick the same pair all over again. (Jahagirdar-Saxena 1991 in *Filmfare*: 53-4)

The above passage emphasizes the affectionate bond between Chawla and her parents, clearly placing Chawla as the dutiful daughter who is taken care of by her natal family. The reference to her residing away from her parents' home is only mentioned in passing, and any reference to independence is compensated by Chawla's insistence on her reliance on her parents, and her inability to 'manage a home' on her own.

Madhuri Dixit also emphasizes her dependence on her natal family for friendship and affection. In the following interview, however, she uses the bond to her natal family as surrogate to a romantic relationship, thus fending off journalists questioning her single status:

[Journalist:] I'd like an honest-to-goodness answer to this. You don't miss having a man around you?

[Madhuri Dixit:] Believe me, I don't. Sometimes I wonder why I'm so content not having a man in my life. Now this may sound ridiculous but my parents have always been there through all my highs and lows. I can tell them anything. (Pillai 1996d: 49)

Dixit defends her respectability by invoking her relationship with her parents. Her statement emphasizes the image of the heroine as an unmarried woman residing and depending, at least emotionally, on her natal family.

Rani Mukherjee also stresses her bond with her natal family, stating that her relationship with them is her priority over all other commitments:

“We Mukherjees are a close-knit family. I merely want to make my parents, my brother and even my maid proud of me. I’m concerned about their feelings. Beyond that I don’t care really. If someone has a problem with me, I won’t spend sleepless nights over it. [...]”

Does she long for a seaside bungalow, a swanky car and a hefty bank account?

“Are you out of your mind?” Rani retorts. “I’d never trade my dad’s house even for the Buckingham Palace. I’m very sentimental about living with my parents. I may buy a flat or even build a bungalow of my own some day. But that’ll only be as an investment.” (Iyer 1999 in *Filmfare*: 66-7)

Although the use of family intimacy as an indicator of respectability is expressed differently in the interviews of 1991, 1996 and 1999 cited above, the emphasis on the dutiful daughter’s bond of affection to her natal family is presented as an important element in a heroine’s star image throughout. As such, the off-screen heroine’s rapport with her family, steeped in reciprocal relations of social sanction and respect, mirrors the elements retained in the on-screen heroine’s figuring. The unmarried career-oriented heroine is afforded guidance, restraint and a measure of protection by a close relationship with her natal family, thus avoiding connotations of an uncontrolled and independent sexuality, and salvaging her respectability.

vi. On star texts

The commercial Hindi film industry generally recognizes the importance of publicity structures, particularly of the print media. Although few heroines are explicit about the complicity of stars and journalists in constructing a star text through the magazines, some are particularly articulate in this regard. In addition, on several occasions heroines assert that the questions and issues pursued by journalists do not necessarily concur with the interests and concerns of Bollywood’s viewing audience at large. Urmila Matondkar maintains, for example: “I think it’s the media which is more obsessed with sex than the public” (Unattributed 1998a in *Filmfare*: 76). In addition, although I have referred to the construction of star texts as a process that involves the complicity of stars and publicity structures, *Filmfare* journalists often exercise their prerogative to comment on a star. Giving an impression of detachment or objectivity, the print media repeatedly prints statements over which a star has little or no control. The following opening sentence to an interview with Shilpa Shetty does not flatter her star image:

There's something different about her... a new air of confidence maybe. But look closer... and you detect that she's had a nose job. (Bharadwaj 1996 in *Filmfare*: n.p.)

Notably, the journalist writes in the second person, facilitating the reader's identification with the interviewer rather than with the star and further emphasizing the dual position of the journalist as publicist and critic.

Madhuri Dixit notes a lacuna between her personal self and her star text as produced in the media, and as she perceives herself in the process of its construction:

[Journalist:] Do you enjoy giving interviews yourself?
 [Madhuri Dixit:] I don't. I feel the real me doesn't come across, I don't express my thoughts too well. I feel silly talking about myself. My work, my films say all that has to be said about me. [...]
 [Journalist:] What do you think of the image created of you by the media?
 [Madhuri Dixit:] Except for a few stray articles, I've been given a fairly okay image by the media. I'm not a controversial person at all. On the contrary, I'm quite mild.
 [Journalist:] Mild?
 [Madhuri Dixit:] As a person, not as an actress. (Unattributed 1996a in *Filmfare*: 47)

Dixit's observations echo Richard Dyer's work on the star. Dyer asserts that stars signify exclusively through performances, appearances and media texts (1998 [1979]). As such, Dyer maintains that stars do not exist outside of media texts, and are known through texts rather than, despite it being an important way stars signify, as 'real people' (1998 [1979]: 1-2). Dixit's statement indicates that she experiences the representation of her star image as removed from what she refers to as 'the real me'.

The most succinct description of the relationship between film stars and the media that I found in the interviews with heroines in *Filmfare* from 1990 to 1999 was made by Kajol, a popular heroine known for her acting skills who grew up in a 'film family', the daughter of an actress and a director, and the niece of legendary heroine Nutan:

[Journalist:] What about your contempt for the press?
 [Kajol:] I think too much importance is given to the press. A lot of journos [i.e. journalists] think they can make or break stars. They even have that kind of attitude. It's false. I understand the importance of the media but its merits have been over-exaggerated. I think the media needs the stars as much as the stars need the media.
 [...] Similarly, I think the relationship between scribes and stars is inter-dependent. It isn't right for either one to assume a superior role. (Pillai 1996b: 27)

Although in some cases, the print media uses its prerogative to determine content in ways that cannot be controlled by stars, Kajol maintains that the relationship between film stars and their publicity structures is interdependent. The mutual reliance of media forms and the

stars that they produce and that constitute their content, then, also defines the relation between stars and publicity structures as necessarily complicit.

vii. On privacy & the media

Despite the acknowledgment of the complicity between stars and publicity structures in the construction of star texts, the nature of the relationship between stars and journalists remains fraught with contestation, especially with regard to issues of privacy. Rachel Dwyer asserts that in the case of *Stardust*, stories are cross-checked with stars to make sure that the stars are happy with them, but that "... gossip about the star's family is taboo and they [the journalists] never write anything on this topic without the star's permission" (2000: 177). *Filmfare* seems to follow these guidelines: Whereas journalists are sometimes chided by stars in portions of interviews that make it into print, star criticisms often refer to the 'yellow journalism' of articles in other (unnamed) magazines, but not in *Filmfare*. As a result, *Filmfare* leaves the impression of being a moderately conservative, well-respected publication that is only mildly salacious in comparison to many other fan magazines.

When statements are made about privacy issues, heroines refer to a generally disrespectful media with regard to an ambiguously defined notion of personal privacy. Most heroines will not answer questions about their family, some will choose not to talk about their love lives, and some will use the defense of safeguarding their personal privacy to avert leading questions, speculation or gossip. Kajol claims that she did not expect the media to disregard her privacy:

Right from the start, Kajol hasn't been blinded by the star glitz. Four years after she made her debut in *Bekhudi*, she still wonders, "I don't know if I did the right thing by joining the movies. I certainly hadn't bargained for the loss of privacy. I can't take a single step without fingers pointing at me. Yeah, so at times I do wish I had done something else."
(Unattributed 1996b in *Filmfare*: 31)

Many heroines, however, will strategically alter their stance on divulging personal information on several different occasions, negotiating their policy on disclosure based on numerous variables. For instance, sometimes heroines will dismiss scandals and avert providing fodder for gossip by professing their reluctance to speak on personal matters, which can also function as a means of salvaging the heroine's respectability. Interviewers also occasionally commend a heroine's strategy of carefully editing what is disclosed to journalists, presumably as indicative of shrewd and well-managed restraint.

Twinkle Khanna's interview, held at her home, refers to the heroine's restraint in divulging personal information to publicity structures, while at the same time indicating the extent to which agents of publicity structures cross over into the domestic space of the star's 'real life':

At this very moment, the house is a cacophonous cove. Aunts, uncles, nephew, friends are tucking in ravenously at the table. Tina nibbles at her food, checking at appropriate intervals if her protein and carbohydrate intakes are adequate.

At long last, the cackle trickles into a thin whisper. As I talk to her, I discern that Twinkle Khanna's manner is professional, with alternating pulses of suspicion and warmth. She doesn't hold journalists as a species in high esteem, but she'll give me the benefit of the doubt. Ahem, ahem. (Pillai 1997b in *Filmfare*: 70)

In addition, some heroines appear to have also changed their minds about non-disclosure when they assess either that rumours and salacious gossip can be averted by 'setting the facts straight', or that 'talking about' personal matters such as family relations may contribute positively to the construction of their star image.

For example, several titles of interviews suggest that content is often determined by a measure of intertextuality, and is partly constituted by refutations of rumours and stories circulating in other magazines or in other publicity structures:

Karisma Kapoor: 'Mind your own Business!' – She doesn't mince words anymore. So here's setting the record straight on a stack of subjects from the Ajay Devgan affair (so-called 'affair', it seems) to Bollywood's back-biting brigade. (Bharadwaj 1995 in *Filmfare*)

Mamta Kulkarni: I'm no saint! – Is she a homebreaker? Or is she just plain heartless? The actress who has ignited a 1,000 rumours, sets the record straight. (Nilesh 1995b in *Filmfare*)

Raveena Tandon: On Deadly Ground – The *mast-mast* miss from *Mohra* has the last word on her never-ending war with Ajay Devgan. (Qureshi 1994 in *Filmfare*)

The above titles also suggest, however, that the interviews have tantalizing content to offer, while allowing both the magazine to claim respectability in providing a forum for refuting allegations, and stars interviewed to reclaim respectability in defending their reputations. While the process of constructing star texts involves a relationship between stars and the publicity structures that feed off them that is necessarily complicit, the dynamics of interaction between stars and the media are neither fixed nor self-evident, marking the relation as perpetually negotiated, disputed and undermined. As a result, the limits of privacy and the public lives of stars are an ongoing point of contention between celebrities and journalists.

viii. On heroines & the industry

Actresses and journalists often make references to the status of the heroine in the Hindi film industry, how she has changed/not changed, and how the dynamics of on-screen and off-screen representation is managed by the industry, the media, and the star personas figuring the Hindi film heroine. The underlying issues of gender politics and middle-class sexual respectability are prominent in accounts of industry double standards and discrimination. Although Manisha Koirala's criticisms of the industry border on the dramatic, she refers to several important issues regarding industry gender bias in terms of sexuality, desire and sexual respectability with only minimal prompting from the interviewer:

[Journalist:] Do you think women in the industry are judged by the morals and standards of men?

[Manisha Koirala:] You can say that again. If a woman has an affair, she's promptly called a slut. If a man has an affair, he's called a stud. Both men and women have the same sexual urges. It's only that women practice restraint... they've been conditioned not to give in to their biological desires. But it's okay for men to be guided by their basic instincts. [...] The truth is that women sublimate their desires to encompass a family and children. [...]

[Journalist:] Do the film industry men go snigger-snigger because you're quite blatant about your lifestyle?

[Manisha Koirala:] Ask me if I care! The attitude of 90 per cent of the producers I work with is: Saleable heroine *hai, nau se chhe baje sets par aa jayegi*, dance *karegi, apna paisa leke chali jaeyegi* [transl. A saleable heroine would be on the sets from nine a.m. to six p.m., would dance, would take her money and go]. In fact I've no problems with these sorts. I don't interact with them. I'm not on their wavelength. I just take my money and go.

[Journalist:] Isn't it strange that a heroine is always spoken about in reference to her physical beauty?

[Manisha Koirala:] Anything goes here, *yaar* [transl. buddy/man]. I read somewhere that once certain heroines were slapped and whipped by their directors if they didn't get their shots right. Even in those days, I can't imagine any director whipping his hero. That would be sacrilege.

I think we women accept men's double standards too easily. Men come out of a woman's womb and yet they [i.e. men] treat them [i.e. women] so badly. Oof, I think it's the men with the inferiority complexes who try to dominate women.

I have great respect for women like Shobhana Samarth and Tanuja²¹ who have lived a full life on their own terms. That's the spirit. I also have tremendous regard for Sharmila Tagore who came back to the movies after her marriage and did some of her best work. (Pillai 1998 in *Filmfare*: 36-7)

Notably, at one point Koirala uses the pronoun 'we' to designate the lot of women ('we women...'), thus creating the sense of an inclusive imagined community polarized by gender. In addition, she responds to a question about gender politics ('Do you think women in the industry are judged by the morals and standards of men?') with an example that refers

²¹ Tanuja is Kajol's mother, a former heroine who was divorced from her husband when her children were very young.

explicitly to sexual activity and sexual morality, in spite of the interviewer's question not being phrased in terms of sex. In Richard Dyer's work establishing 1950s America as a context where sex was considered a key to knowledge and self-realization, he cites Betty Friedan's findings that women interviewed for her research would "give [Friedan] an explicitly sexual answer to a question that was not sexual at all" (in Dyer 1987: 26). Koirala's statement above is comparable in that it mentions sexual relations and desire without explicit prompting. However, while the heroine talks about sex, she does so in a manner that aims to salvage its respectability with regard to 'talking about' it and with regard to the unmarried woman.

Although Koirala speaks of female heterosexual desire, she does not mention one of the most established myths surrounding the sexual respectability in the Hindi film industry is that of the 'casting couch', where heroines purportedly 'buy' roles with sex. The myth of the 'casting couch' exacerbates ideas about a professional female performer literally and figuratively prostituting herself. Most heroines are very careful to dismiss the 'couch', either by asserting that they would never compromise their sexual morality in order to further their career, or by maintaining that they have never had to deal with the propositions of producers, directors, etc. Both assertions, especially the latter claim, serve to uphold notions of a heroine's respectability, insinuating that she doesn't give the impression of being 'the kind of girl' who could be lured to the casting couch, or who could be propositioned. Dismissing the 'casting couch' myth suggests the moral vigilance of the Hindi film heroine. Neha elaborates:

Mention the dreaded casting couch syndrome rumoured to be prevalent in the industry and Neha harrumps [*sic*], "You talk as if such things don't exist in the corporate world."

She reacts sharply defending the industry. "Let me tell you that nothing can happen without your consent. If an actress wants to sleep to get a role, that's her prerogative. But I'm not desperate enough to do that."

Looking askance at me, she natters, "I wonder about the psyche of the actresses who sleep around for a role. Mind you, I'm not judging them. But I definitely feel sorry for them. You really have to be under severe pressure to do that."

Neha denies having had any nasty experience in the industry. "Touchwood!" she exclaims. "No one has made a pass at me. And even if someone has, I've been oblivious to it. My face reflects my vulnerability. A man would think twice before making a pass at me. And I'm clear about one thing in life, I don't need to do anything sleazy to get a role. I'd rather pack up and leave." Then she adds jokingly, "I don't think the industry guys make passes at women who wear glasses. So I'm safe." (Surendranath 1999: 103)

Neha's statement also suggests that heroines who sleep around to get roles in films aren't talented enough to succeed without resorting to shady tactics. Conversely, Neha's point of view suggests that truly talented heroines don't need to compromise their respectability to achieve some measure of success.

In addition, accounts of a heroine's role, especially when narrating the plotlines of blockbusters, are often collapsed into the first person as the actress appears to fully identify with an on-screen character. At least, the heroine appears to construct her narration of her role so as to invite a reading that collapses the on-screen with the off-screen, 'reel-' with 'real-life'. Madhuri Dixit eventually collapses her description of an on-screen role into a narrative in the first person:

The intention is to discuss *Dil To Pagal Hai* ['The heart is crazy' 1997, dir. Yash Chopra]. Right off, she asserts that she liked the character she portrayed because "she was attractive, intense, witty, humorous and alive."

If she had to choose between the Shah Rukh Khan character²² and the Akshay Kumar character, in real life, then?

"Then what?" she looks at me as if I were dottier than a dalmatian. "I'd choose the Shah Rukh character, of course. Because the woman I played, truly loved him... only she couldn't express her feelings openly. Like me, she was a middle-class girl who felt hesitant, always asking herself, 'Am I doing the right thing?'"

When talk spread that Yash Chopra was likely to drop MD's [i.e. Madhuri Dixit's] role and extend Karisma Kapoor's, did she have any apprehensions? "None at all," she emphasises. "I knew my role well, there was no way it could be cut or reduced. So I was very relaxed. I knew Yashji and his unit would never indulge in such petty tactics. They believe in themselves and their product. A star's status doesn't matter to them."

"Karisma's role," she feels, "was that of an extrovert. Her character was youth-oriented and hep. Mine was just the opposite – I was an introvert and somewhat traditional."

Didn't she feel cheated that she loses out to KK [i.e. Karisma Kapoor] in the dance competition? "Come on, I didn't lose out as such," Dix says. "The scene required me to just stop dancing... because I realise that the other girl is so much in love with Shah Rukh."
(Mohamed 1998a: 32)

Dixit's statement illustrates how respectability can be reclaimed through an identification with an on-screen persona in order to effectuate the figuring of a particular star image. Although stars sometimes strive to keep their 'real-life' star images separate from the roles they play on-screen, they can also foster a collapse or conflation of the two modes of representation. I cannot speculate to what extent this collapse may be due to the image-managing strategies of heroines, or to what extent the collapse may point towards a larger conflation of modes of representation, as regarded through the categories of 'real' and

²² Please note that the film's characters are being associated with the names of the actors playing the roles, rather than the screen names relevant to the plot. In addition, no synopsis of the film is given, rather it is assumed that the readership will have seen the film discussed.

‘represented’ that dominate Euro-American texts of representation, in South Asian popular culture.

Women’s roles in the commercial cinema are alternately praised or attacked for their ideal qualities as well as their lack of realism. The criticism or justification of ‘typical heroine’s roles’ by the heroines acting them out indicates the contested status of the female protagonist in the commercial cinema. Manisha Koirala speculates:

[Manisha Koirala:] Perhaps over the years, the demands made on the heroine have changed drastically. Audiences love dancing. Actresses need to do a *Kaate nahin katte* or a *Choli ke peechhe* [= suggestive song and dance sequences] to draw the claps and the wolf-whistles. Recent No.1 actresses like Sridevi and Madhuri Dixit have been amazing dancers, so it has become the rule that every heroine should be a terrific dancer.

Of late, there haven’t been too many good dancers around, so I think those *dhoom dhamaka* [= film song reference] dances are being sorely missed. At the same time, we do have tremendous dancers like Karisma Kapoor and Urmila Matondkar. Maybe, the audiences want more heroines who can swing to the beat effortlessly.

[Journalist:] There’s no denying that glamour is the most marketable commodity on the film scene today.

[Manisha Koirala:] Exactly. I think the films we make cater strictly to the market demands. In 90 per cent of our films, what’s the heroine doing anyway? Looking sexy, belting out a couple of songs and doing her *rona-dhona* [transl. extensive weeping, lit. crying-washing] number in the climax scene. (Pillai 1996e in *Filmfare*: 66)

Koirala belittles the heroine’s role in the commercial Hindi cinema, using staple terms for enacting desirability through dance performances (‘to draw the claps and wolf-whistles’) as well as for describing stock elements of a heroine’s melodramatic role (‘her *rona-dhona* number’).

However, Koirala does not mention the famous subversions of censorship norms with regard to on-screen romance, sometimes described as the hero and heroine ‘running around trees’. *Filmfare* journalist Deepa Gahlot contends:

So was the middle-class *hungama* [transl. uproar] over the S-word really worth the trouble? On the contrary, isn’t it a sign of progress that sex is finally coming out of the closet? [...] Sex is not dangerous. [...]

At least our films are talking about sex; they aren’t resorting to clichés [*sic*] like flowers, *totas* and *mainas* [transl. parrots and mynah birds] and cycles colliding. (Gahlot 1994: 89)

Gahlot uses the term ‘sex’ ambiguously, because the sex act as such is only extremely rarely overtly articulated on-screen. I contend that her use of ‘sex’ refers to the enacting of sexual desire and desirability, as they are being renegotiated with reference to sexual respectability and acceptable femininity.

The gender politics of the Hindi film industry alluded to in the interviews with heroines is seldom addressed in similar terms in the film narratives of the 1990s.

On the occasions when gendered double standards are explicitly articulated in a film sequence, they are framed in terms of difference rather than in terms of equality. See, for example, the sequence in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* where Anjali's basketball skills are impeded by her sari (described in the section 'a. The heroine as (potential) wife: all in the family' above), emphasizing the different roles ascribed to Indian men and women. Although the on-screen dancing heroine salvages the respectability challenged by her overt enacting of desirability, she does so because moralistic connotations are effectively elided in the film narrative, rather than resolved or sanctioned by figures of moral authority in the course of a film's plotline. Among the films of the 1990s viewed for the purposes of this project, only one film emphasized the agency and vulnerability of the career-oriented woman, while framing the on-screen treatment of double standards explicitly in terms of equality rather than difference: *Yes Boss* (1997, dir. Aziz Mirza).

In *Yes Boss*, Juhi Chawla plays an aspiring model named Seema. Already married, womanizing industry tycoon Siddharth (Aditya Pancholi) decides to seduce her, enlisting the help of his business assistant, Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan). As it happens, Rahul had met and fallen for Seema previously, but puts his own feelings aside in order to better serve his boss and in order to further his own dreams of a successful career. Maintaining the charade, however, involves Rahul in helping Siddharth to deceive his own wife, eventually by pretending that he and Seema are married. The plot thickens when Rahul's mother, who suffers from a health condition that makes her vulnerable to shock and stress, comes to know about Rahul's 'marriage' to Seema. The *bahū* is welcomed into their home, and as much as they feel guilty about the farce, Rahul and Seema become increasingly aware of their feelings for each other.

Ultimately, Siddharth decides to 'claim' Seema, and attempts to silence Rahul with promises of a successful career. Although Rahul initially accepts Siddharth's offer, he changes his mind and a fight ensues between the boss and his employee. Rahul eventually wins the fight, and he and Seema embrace. At this point, Siddharth points out that Rahul's mother will never accept a *bahū* who had only pretended to be married at the behest of her married boyfriend. Rahul's mother, brought to the scene

by a concerned friend, interjects. She addresses Seema, stopping Rahul's attempts to begin to explain:

[Mother:] Look at me Seema. Seema. There's no need for you to feel ashamed. If my son was caught with the wrong people while dreaming his big dreams, why not you also? What is this difference Seema? Just because you're a girl? You have done nothing wrong. People like these [indicating Siddharth] are the ones who have done wrong, and should be punished. As a woman and a mother, I accept you as my own daughter-in-law. (Yes Boss)

([Mā:] 'Merī taraf dekho Seema. Seema. Tumhẽ sharminḁa hone ki koī zarūrat nāhī hai. Agar merā beṭā baṛā hone ke sapnā dekh kar kissī galat logō ke bātō mē pas saktā hai, to phir tum kyō nāhī? Ye faraq kyō Seema? Sirf tum ek laṛkī ho, is liye? Is mē tumhārī koī galatī nāhī hai. Galatī to in jaise logo ki hāī. Jinhẽ sazā milnī chāhīye. Ek aurat aur ek mā hone ke lāte māī tumhẽ apnī bahū ke rūp me isvitār kartī hū.' Yes Boss)

This monologue on the part of a sanctioning elder serves to effectuate the resolution of the plot, effectively transforming desire into *dharma*. It makes clear the moral connotations of gender politics, framing the resolution in terms of equality by mentioning the hero's example to exonerate the heroine. In addition, the monologue breaks with the conventions of Hindi film narrative by explicitly addressing and reworking the standards of respectability applied to the on-screen heroine.

The plot resolution of *Yes Boss* illustrates the renegotiation of the heroine's sexual respectability, and the acceptability of this renegotiation, as adopted into popular Hindi film narrative. The emergence of the theme of renegotiation into narrative form should be understood as occurring in tandem with issues discussed in the interviews with heroines, as examined in the context of this study. As such, this study has drawn from Richard Dyer's assertion: "The analysis of images always needs to see how any given instance is embedded in a network of other instances" (2002 [1993]: 2). The network of instances I have examined focus on the many statements of heroines and journalists in the context of the magazine *Filmfare*, and the on-screen representations in the concurrent popular films of the 1990s.

The renegotiation figured by the dancing heroine as a collapse between ideal heroine and vamp roles continues to frame acceptability in terms of sexuality, and specifically sexual respectability. The findings presented in this chapter show how the issues of sexuality with respect to the Hindi film heroine are addressed in terms of marriage and joint family relations, in terms of romantic love and desire/desirability, as well as in terms of navigating a heroine's career in the film

industry. All these aspects deal with issues of controlled and uncontrolled sexuality, domesticity and *lāj*, as well as the dynamics of renegotiating respectability as a working woman. The major difference between the dancing heroine and either the ideal heroine or vamp figures lies in the agency inherent in the negotiation of respectability. In addition, it lies in the 'talking about' these negotiations by stars, journalists, industry players, and on occasion, politicians.

Furthermore, this chapter shows how instances of both on-screen and off-screen representation reflect the concerns of renegotiating sexual respectability. The mutually informing relationship of film narrative and off-screen publicity structures are illustrated in the above examples. The section examining perceptions of exposure and 'vulgarity' demonstrates how the on-screen and off-screen modes are intertwined, especially in the implications of a heroine's performance for her personal sexual respectability. This chapter also explores the complicity of stars and journalists in constructing star texts, as they alternately support and undermine each other's efforts in managing both reputations and notions of respectability. As such, the publicity structures are grounds for advertising, and constitute an arena where different ideas and representations of ideas are both 'sold' and undersold. Perhaps, in literally buying the magazine, the readership does not necessarily 'buy into' what is 'sold'. However, in reading the magazine as consumers, readers buy into the selling of representations, as well as that of material goods. Consequently, the renegotiation of sexual respectability is commodified through the print media, and can be bought and/or bought into by a readership of consumers, who are also a viewing and listening audience for the commercial Hindi film industry.

6. Conclusion

The Hindi film heroine's renegotiation of femininity and sexual morality involves salvaging her respectability as a working and unmarried woman who enacts/feigns desire and desirability on a professional basis. Both her personal and professional roles are defined in terms of sexuality and are, thus, renegotiated along similar parameters. The renegotiation of sexual respectability parallels the principal transformation figured by the 'dancing heroine'; the collapse of the ideal heroine and vamp characters. Although the ideal heroine and the vamp are narrative conventions of filmic iconography, they refer to models and notions of controlled and uncontrolled feminine sexuality, of an authentic national identity, and of the value structure of the (North Indian) joint family system. By enacting the collapse of these roles while maintaining her position as the narrative female protagonist, the Hindi film heroine figures a new model of acceptable femininity. Notably, the narrative plotlines of the most popular films of the 1990s allow the heroine, her desires as well as her actions and roles, to be sanctioned by the approval of elders and other characters, thus transforming her from a model of femininity figured by desire to one of *dharma*. In the *Filmfare* interviews, stars reclaim a respectability that is alternately defended or condemned by journalists, and presumably, alternately accepted, desired or refuted by readers.

That the emergence of the dancing heroine alludes to a manifestation of feminism, as it is understood as a Western model¹, is at best, contentious. The rejection of the label 'feminism' in urban South Asia has been discussed in Chapter 3. An example of emergent models of femininity derived from notions of feminism is known as the 'new Indian woman', a term whose use in media and official discourse beginning of the 1970s is defined by Sunder Rajan:

[...] a construction which serves not only to reconcile in her subjectivity the conflicts between tradition and modernity in Indian society, but works also to deny the actual conflict that women existentially register as an aspect of their lives. (1993: 129)

Contrary to Sunder Rajan's description, however, I have argued that the dancing heroine, particularly in off-screen representations of her star persona, not only

¹ See Anzaldúa and Moraga 1981.

continually registers the 'conflict' or tension inherent in renegotiating aspects of her identity, but also is careful to frame her negotiations in terms of respectability and acceptability. The boundaries within which the dancing heroine operates (i.e. heterosexuality, enacting love and desire, a life-cycle trajectory of marriage and motherhood) act as the "[...] wider terms of limitation and possibility" in which representations are articulated as set cultural forms (2002: 2). The dancing heroine is not defined by an outright transgression of ideal models of femininity. Rather, she seeks to renegotiate her sexuality in terms of acceptability, that is, through the collapse of the binary opposition of positively and negatively sexualized femininity. As such, she places herself within, not outside, the perpetual negotiation of socially acceptable norms.

The dynamics of establishing a progression of socially acceptable norms is often discussed as the process of rendering natural, or 'naturalizing' ideas (e.g. Dyer 1987, Gupta and Ferguson 1992, Harraway 1989, Lanoue Winter 2002). Richard Dyer, in his study of the issues of sexuality enacted by and around Marilyn Monroe in 1950s America, maintains not only that the themes of naturalness and artlessness were instrumental in representations reworking attitudes towards sexuality and sexual desire, but also that both innocence and guiltlessness were equally pivotal (1987:31-35). Partha Chatterjee notes the importance of innocence in the sexually alluring images of Hindi film heroines (1995), echoing Dyer's assertion that the key to Marilyn Monroe's star image was her exuding knowledge of sexuality without a loss of innocence, turning sex into something comfortable and non-threatening (1987: 35-39).

Although naturalness has not been explicitly examined in the course of this study, the projected life-cycle trajectory of the heroine as an eventual wife and mother can be construed as conforming to ideas of the 'natural' life cycle of a respectable woman. The following description of Juhi Chawla frames the natural aspect of Chawla's sexuality in terms of the elision of conflict asserted by Sunder Rajan in his description of the 'new Indian woman', and uses much the same terms as Dyer has shown in the case of Marilyn Monroe:

She emerges seraph-like out of the aquamarine waves of Mauritius. In a body-clinging sarong with a dash of derring-do, Juhi Chawla lip syncs to an Anu Malik number.

Despite oozing sensuous appeal, she stays cool. Ms Chawla has turned the sexual revolution into something sweet, almost unthreatening.

[...] This cutie proved herself. She slayed the art and martwallahs [i.e. art cinema and commercial cinema critics] with a performance that said it all: farm-fresh and natural.

Mansoor Khan [i.e. director of Chawla's debut film, *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* 1988] recalls, "Though we never really talked, I knew that she had grasped the script instinctively. She is a contemporary woman and that was reflected in her character." (Pillai 1995b: 96)

Chawla's description epitomizes the collapse of the binary opposition of ideal heroine and vamp roles. The director Mansoor Khan equates her successful enacting of this collapse with her 'contemporaneity', echoing Sunder Rajan's 'new Indian woman' in that the terminology indicates changed images of femininity that elide the concept of feminism. Despite the uncanny similarities with the descriptions of Marilyn Monroe examined by Dyer, the assertions of naturalness in Chawla's description seem contrived in their tone: 'farm-fresh' is an expression that barely corresponds to the issues of respectability generally discussed with regard to the Hindi film heroine. Nonetheless, the journalist's attempt to credit Chawla with artlessness as a positive, naturalizing attribute, rather than as a cynical comment undermining her star image, is palpable in the above description.

This study seeks to establish that fan literature, as a vehicle for both star texts and critical commentary, and film narratives disseminate or 'sell' ideas about feminine sexuality in South Asia. The figure of the dancing heroine was not the only model of femininity that appeared in the Hindi films of the 1990s. However, the most successful among the films released during that period were conspicuous carriers of a comparable model of femininity that seemed to elide the moralistic connotations that had previously marked the sexuality enacted by ideal heroines. Consequently, it can be extrapolated that viewing audiences rejected certain representations of femininity while choosing, accepting, or 'buying into' others. The definitive triumph of the dancing heroine can be attributed to the unprecedented success of the 1994 film *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* (dir. Sooraj Barjatya). The female protagonist Nisha, described as 'goody-goody', 'vegetarian' in *Filmfare* and 'ideal' by audiences interviewed by Patricia Uberoi (2001), was played by Madhuri Dixit, a heroine known for her sensual dances and "high-voltage sexuality" (Mukherjee, R. 1992b: 46). As a Hindi film heroine simultaneously enacting virtuousness and desirability, Nisha/Dixit

embodied the figure chosen by viewing audiences as their preferred representation of femininity in which to invest their anxieties and desires.

In addition, Dixit's star image emphasized both her respectability and her ordinary, middle-class background. Rachel Dwyer maintains that the notions of respectability employed by the Hindi film industry are intertwined with issues of middle-class cultural legitimation (2000). In the interviews with heroines in *Filmfare*, several stars refer to the specifically middle-class respectability of their families and values, referring to the middle classes as conflated with ideal pan-Indian identity. Dwyer argues not only that popular Hindi films address the concerns of the rising middle classes, but also that the Hindi film industry betrays a partiality to middle-class perspectives and value systems, implying that the middle classes are increasingly involved in the film business as both producers of media and as a potential market of viewers (2000). Notably, popular films are vehicles for 'selling' ideas as well as for displaying commodities, investing merchandise and the lifestyles they connote as objects of material desire.

The plotlines of recent Hindi films support the assertion that the popular cinema is being increasingly shaped and addressed towards the new middle classes. In films such as *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* (2000, dir. Aziz Mirza) and *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001, dir. Farhan Akhtar), protagonists are noticeably more centred on themselves and their peers; their families figure only peripherally to the narrative. Plotlines are powered by love, desire and compatibility and are conspicuously littered with consumer items, particularly in relation to youth culture. In *Dil Chahta Hai*, for example, a song and dance sequence depicting a nightclub scene is presented as celebrating a generation. In *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani*, the heroine is a shrewd and ambitious reporter; she is shown negotiating her contract, and undermining the competitive efforts of the hero, another reporter. The most palpable marker, however, of the middle-class address and appeal of recent films is in their appropriation of Indian pop music.

Although the particular eclectic brand of *filmī* music dominated the music industry in South Asia until the 1970s, and continues to take up a sizeable part of the music market (Arnold 1988, Manuel 1993), Indian pop music is gaining prominence

in the music industry as well as in the popular film industry. Recent Hindi films tend towards using poetic pop ballads in song sequences with sweeping camera angles instead of dancing heroes and heroines, which is quite different from the stylized excess of *filmī* spectacle. In describing Indian pop music, Peter Manuel has emphasized the polished studio sound of pop, the emphasis on the singer's star persona, and the tunefulness of melodies that blend Indian sensibilities with Western pop elements (Manuel 1993: 179-191). These concerns seem to echo the newfound emphasis on technical aspects in the Hindi film industry that is reflected in the dearth of technicians mentioned in the opening credits: editing, lighting, sound technology, etc.

Pop music, trendy clothing and 'aerobic' dance sequences seem to have affected an erasure of elements in the popular Hindi film that functioned as markers of 'Indian' identity: semi-classically inflected vocals, sari-wearing young women, and dance sequences informed by classical styles. However, on several occasions the elements associated with the 'new' youth culture are blended with markers of gesture and clothing referencing 'traditional Indianness', often in the presence of elders or during religious rituals. These tendencies refer to a middle-class audience because the elements of the youth culture represented on-screen infer a real or aspiring capacity for consumer spending. Pop music is accessible to those who have access to satellite television and can listen to music on purchased cassettes, CDs, or on the Internet. Trendy clothing infers a protected lifestyle, where clothes can be purchased on a regular basis in order to follow fashions, and where women can dress in styles that would not be considered respectable in public, or lower-middle class environments. 'Aerobic' dance sequences refer to the untrained dance styles of the nightclub scene and in MTV videos, for those with access to satellite television. In short, the above elements are available (or thinkable, intelligible) to those with the consumer purchasing power to 'buy into' them.

While the 'dancing heroine' can be used as a marker for cultural attitudes in the 1990s, her more recent figuring seems to constitute a function of an urban, middle class aesthetic. The difference between the dancing heroine of the 1990s and those of films after 2000 is anchored in issues of audience reception. Of the newer films, one

of the only major blockbusters was *Lagaan* (2001, dir. Ashutosh Gowariker), set in a village in colonial India, under the British Raj. Whereas viewing audiences literally, and thus figuratively, 'bought into' films such as *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!*, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, they have yet to buy into the more recent manifestations of dancing heroines, which seem to be geared towards a middle-class youth culture.

This study has established the importance of issues of sexuality with regard to the figuring of the Hindi film heroine. During the 1990s, the heroine's main objective in on-screen narratives, as well as in off-screen constructions of her star text, has been to renegotiate her sexual respectability. She has done this by evading, refuting or adamantly addressing issues of contention with a complicit media industry. Most importantly, she naturalizes or deems guiltless actions that would have labelled previous heroines, vamps. In so doing, her figuring transforms the parameters of acceptable femininity. Instead of naming the transformation as transgressive, however, she assimilates her 'dancing' into the middle-class codes of sexual respectability. In succeeding to assimilate a transformed notion of feminine sexuality into a concept of middle-class respectability, the heroine must also succeed in changing that concept just enough to accommodate her dancing.

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- Dacait*. 1987 dir. Rahul Rawail, starring: Meenakshi Sheshadri, Sunny Deol, Paresh Rawal, Raza Murad, Rati Agnihotri. Music: R.D.Burman. Lyrics: A.Bakshi.

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- Devdas*. 1955 dir. Bimal Roy, starring: Dilip Kumar, Suchitra Sen, Vijayanthimala, Nasir Hussain, Motilal. Music: S.D. Burman.
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- Dil To Pagal Hai*. 1997 dir. Yash Chopra, starring: Shah Rukh Khan, Madhuri Dixit, Karisma Kapoor, (special app.) Akshay Kumar, Saeed Jaffery, Farida Jalal, Aruna Irani, Deven Verma. Music: Uttam Singh.
- Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*. 1995 dir. Aditya Chopra, starring: Kajol, Shah Rukh Khan, Anupam Kher, Farida Jalal, Amrish Puri, Mandira Bedi, Satish Shah, Parmeet Sethi. Music: Jatin-Lalit.
- Duplicate*. 1998 dir. Mahesh Bhatt, starring: (double role) Shah Rukh Khan , Juhi Chawla, Sonali Bendre, Gulshan Grover, Farida Jalal, (special app.) Kajol. Music: Anu Malik. Lyrics: Javed Akhtar.
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- Henna*. 1991 dir. Randhir Kapoor, starring: Rishi Kapoor, (intr.) Zeba Bakhtiar, Reema Lagoo, Raza Murad, Farida Jalal. Music: Ravindra Jain.
- Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* 1994 dir. Sooraj Barjatya, starring: Madhuri Dixit, Salman Khan, Mohnish Behl, Renuka Shahane, Alok Nath, Reema Lagoo, Ajit Vachhani, Bindu,

Sahila Chadda, Dilip Joshi, Dinesh Hingoo, Priya Arun, Satish Shah, Himani Shivpuri, Laxmikant Berde. Music: Raam-Laxman.

Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam. 1999 dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali, starring: Salman Khan, Ajay Devgan, Aishwarya Rai, Helen. Music: Esmayeel-Darbar. Lyrics: Mehboob.

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Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikander. 1992 dir. Mansoor Hussain, starring: Aamir Khan, Ayesha Jhulka, Pooja Bedi, Asrani, Ahmed Khan. Music: Jatin-Lalit.

Khalnayak. 1993 dir. Subhash Ghai, starring: Madhuri Dixit, Sanjay Dutt, Jackie Shroff, Neeta Gupta, Rakhee, Ramya. Music: Laxmikant-Pyarelal.

Kuch Kuch Hota Hai. 1998 dir. (intr.) Karan Johar, starring: Shah Rukh Khan, Kajol, Rani Mukherjee, Johnny Lever, Anupam Kher, Farida Jalal, (special app.) Neelam, (special app.) Salman Khan. Music: Jatin-Lalit.

Lagaan. 2001 dir. Ashutosh Gowariker, starring: Aamir Khan, Gracy Singh, Rachel Shelly, Paul Blackthorne. Music: A.R. Rahman. Lyrics: Javed Akhtar.

Lajja. 2001 dir. Rajkumar Santoshi, starring: Anil Kapoor, Jackie Shroff, Ajay Devgan, Rekha, Madhuri Dixit, Manisha Koirala, Madhuri Dixit, Mahima, Asrani, Tinnu Anand, Razzak Khan, Gulshan Grover, Johnny Lever, Denny Denzongpa, (special app.) Sonali Bendre, Urmila Matondkar. Music: Anu Malik. Lyrics: Sameer, P.Joshi.

Lamhe. 1991 dir. Yash Chopra, starring: Sridevi, Anil Kapoor, Anupam Kher, Deepak Malhotra, Manohar Singh, Ila Arun. Music: Shiv-Hari. Lyrics: Anand Bakshi.

Maine Pyaar Kiya. 1989 dir. Sooraj Barjatya, starring: Salman Khan, (intr.) Bhagyashree, Alok Nath, Rajiv Verma, Reema Lagoo, Ajit Vachhani, Harish Patel, Deep Dhillon, Huma Khan, Pervin Dastur, Mohnish Behl, Laxmikant Berde. Music: Raam-Laxman.

Mere Mehboob. 1963 dir. H.S.Rawail, starring: Rajendra Kumar, Sadhana, Ameeta, Ashok Kumar, Nimmi, Johnny Walker, Pran. Music: Naushad. Lyrics: Shakeel Badayuni.

Mere Yaar Ki Shaadi Hai. 2002 dir. Sanjay Gadhvi, starring: Uday Chopra, Jimmy Shergill, Sanjana, Bipasha Basu, Alok Nath, Saurabh Shukla, Neena Kulkarni, Bindu.

- Monsoon Wedding*. 2001 dir. Mira Nair, starring: Naseeruddin Shah, Lillette Dubey, Shefali Shetty, Parveen Dabaas, Vijay Raaz.
- Mother India*. 1957 dir. Mehboob Khan, starring: Nargis, Sunil Dutt, Raj Kumar, Rajendra Kumar. Music: Naushad Ali.
- Mrityudand*. 1997 dir. Prakash Jha, starring: Madhuri Dixit, Shabana Azmi, Ayub Khan, Shilpa Shirodkar, Om Puri, Mohan Agashe. Music: Anand-Milind. Lyrics: J.Akhtar.
- Pakeeza*. 1971 dir. Kamal Amrohi, starring: Meena Kumari, Raj Kumar, Ashok Kumar. Music: Ghulam Mohammed, Naushad Ali.
- Pardes*. 1997 dir. Subhash Ghai, starring: Shah Rukh Khan, (intr.) Mahima Chaudhary, (intr.) Apurva Agnihotri, Amrish Puri. Music: Nadeem-Shravan. Lyrics: Anand Bakshi.
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- Sadak*. 1991 dir. Mahesh Bhatt, starring: Sanjay Dutt, Deepak Tijori, Pooja Bhatt, Neelima Azeem, (special app.) Soni Razdan, Avtar Gill, Sadashiv Amrapurkar, Manohar Singh. Music: Nadeem-Shravan. Lyrics: Sameer.
- Silsila*. 1981 dir. Yash Chopra, starring: Amitabh Bachchan, Shashi Kapoor, Jaya Bhaduri, Rekha, Sanjeev Kumar, Deven Verma. Music: Shiv-Hari.
- Taal*. 1999 dir. Subhash Ghai, starring: Akshaye Khanna, Aishwarya Rai, Anil Kapoor, Alok Nath, Amrish Puri, Sushma Seth. Music: A.R. Rahman.
- Tezaab – A violent Love Story*. 1988 dir. N.Chandra, starring: Anil Kapoor, Chunkey Pandey, Madhuri Dixit, Kiran Kumar, Suresh Oberoi, Mandakini, Annu Kapoor, Suparna Anand, Johnny Lever. Music: Laxmikant-Pyarelal. Lyrics: Javed Akhtar.
- Tumko Na Bhool Payenge*. 2002 dir. Pankush Parashan, starring: Salman Khan, Diya Mirza, Sushmita Sen, Inder Kumar, Mukesh Rishi, Sharat Saxena, Nishighanda Wad, Alok Nath, Rajpal Yadav, Johnny Lever, Pankaj Dheer, (special app.) Arbaaz Khan. Music: Sajid-Wajid.

Umrao Jaan. 1981 dir. Muzaffar Ali, starring: Rekha, Naseeruddin Shah, Farouque Shaikh, Raj Babbar, Shaukat Kaifi, Khan Ghilzai, Prema Narayan, Akbar Rashid, Gajanan Jagirdar, Dina Pathar, Rita Rani Kaul, Shaheen Sultan. Music: Khayyam.

Yes Boss! 1997 dir. Aziz Mirza, starring: Shah Rukh Khan, Juhi Chawla, Aditya Pancholi, Kashmira Shah, Kulbulshan Kharbanda, Gulshan Grover, Reema Lagoo. Music: Jatin-Lalit. Lyrics: Javed Akhtar.

